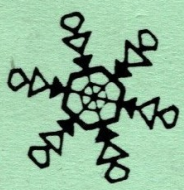
Four Seasons With LaCroix



Lorraine Duffield

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by Lorraine Duffield

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Marie

Shining moon
Dancing along
Danger lies along your path
Show me my savior
Unlikely hero
His name feared
Even by the most stalwart of us
Except by me
His devoted
Rescuer of my life
It is his forever
Or for as long as he wants it.

In A Name

Some nights cause a restless kind of longing when the moon rises high in the night sky. The neighborhood dogs howl irritably, protesting the fences that surround them. Cats slink past, mere inches away, taunting their confinement. Humans find themselves propelled to their feet to take an unaccustomed nocturnal stroll.

To Marie Delacroix it was enough to make her gather up the lead belonging to her beloved mutt Minnie and set forth on her dimly lit neighborhood street. She knew better; the area surrounding her South Kansas City confines had become increasingly unsafe, night or day. Walks had to be short and somewhat circular, since it wasn't prudent to venture too far from the safety of home. Which was why Marie slipped a huge cop-style flashlight into the holder on her right hip. It was heavy, nothing more than a steel pipe filled with batteries. It could be useful as a club.

Gravel crunching underfoot. Marie walked slowly. Impatient, Minnie strained at the lead, not content to merely be restricted to the road. In an unconscious move, Marie snapped the choker collar.

"Back!" she commanded.

Minnie briefly fell back to trot at the side of her mistress, only to waver when Marie failed to remain in step. As usual, her mind wasn't on the task at hand. She lifted her heavy brown hair from the nape of her neck. Even restrained in a French braid, it was cloyingly uncomfortable. Straggles of hair escaped the braid and tickled her face, curling naturally in the heavy Missouri humidity. Late spring in that state can be unpredictable. Sudden storms would blow in and out with incredible speed. As a consequence, the shorts put on in the early morning could cause goose pimples by the afternoon. The jeans she was wearing were a bad choice; denim wasn't the coolest of fabrics and sandals would have been better than Reeboks. Still, it was better than in her house, which boasted an air conditioner in the bedroom only. A million miles away in thought, Marie failed to realize where her feet had taken her until Minnie's low growl shocked her back to the here and now. Fifty feet away was a parked car with its back door open, and two straining bodies half in and half out of the vehicle. A prostitute and her 'date' were boldly conducting business beneath a street lamp. Her face set in a moue of distaste, Marie turned to head for home, only to be brought up short by three teenage boys wearing identical hooded sweat jackets. Caught snoozing, Minnie began an angry barking and lunged toward the boys. The car started up and sped away.

"Minnie stop! Sorry," she apologized nervously, trying to control the large dog. "She doesn't like strangers." She moved to step around the group, but the tall one in the middle stopped her with a hand at her chest.

"What makes you think you can just walk down our street?" the boy on the left asked.

"Uh...Well, this is my neighborhood."

"Oh, so you own the whole block, is that it?" the middle boy said belligerently, taking a step forward and forcing Marie to step back. Minnie began to growl deep in her throat.

"No, I just mean I belong here." Marie's voice was beginning to quaver, while Minnie started her please-let-me-kill-them whine.

"Minnie, get em!" Marie shouted, and dropped the lead as the three youths rushed her. She drew out the huge flashlight and swung it at the nearest boy. It hit the side of his head with a loud thunk. He teetered, then fell heavily to the pavement.

"Lucky shot," she muttered to herself.

Minnie's front paws pinned one kid to the ground, which left the third one free and extremely pissed at Marie.

"You think you're hot shit because you have a flashlight and a big ass dog? Lady, you just ran out of lucky shots," he snarled, snatching the flashlight with ease and tossing it to the side. "I'm the one you should have knocked out." He backhanded her into a ditch and then started kicking her in the ribs. Groaning, Marie felt the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. She tried to get to her knees, only to feel his hands flipping her onto her back. He grabbed her shirt and tore it open, buttons flying either which way. He pulled out a switch blade and sliced apart her bra cups. He laid the blade at her throat, while his other hand seemed to be everywhere. With the sensation of cold steel against her skin, Marie stiffened and lay still, barely daring to gasp a breath.

She forgot about Minnie, who neatly tore out the throat of the boy pinned by the dog's massive weight when he'd begun to struggle against her. Minnie leaped onto the back of the would be rapist, who was rubbing himself between Marie's thighs suggestively. The knife knocked to the side and sliced Marie on the right ear lobe. Sticking his left elbow in Marie's chest, her attacker twisted around to bury the blade into Minnie, who yelped and crashed in a heap, breathing hard, labored gasps of air.

The man on Marie returned to the task at hand, using the blade to hack off her jeans and wispy panties while he held her by the throat. Marie screamed in pain, glaring straight in his eyes. Switch blade between his teeth, he worked his hands between the two of them. He moved forward to complete his task, but instead felt himself being lifted into the air. He turned his head and found himself gazing into a pair of glowing eyes in a face so white it seemed to glow with a preternatural light. The mouth in the face opened, revealing long, wickedly sharp canine teeth.

"Now is that the way to treat a lady?" The man-like creature sneered, then tore open the youth's throat, in much the same way as Minnie had done to her victim. Marie lay spread-eagled, stupefied, as she watched it feed with loud sucking noises until he finished, snapping the neck and tossing the remains aside. He laid a foot on the neck of the unconscious boy to snap that one, too. Inexplicably, the creature's teeth receded to a more human state and his eyes ceased to glow. He now appeared to be nothing more than a tall, handsome man with short-cropped light brown hair. He was muscular, but not in an overt way. He exuded strength

and, Marie thought uncharitably, a certain cruel twist of the mouth. Having witnessed this strange transformation, Marie already found it hard to believe that mere moments before he had looked like a creature sprang from Hell. Were it not for the blood staining his lips, she may have been able to believe just that.

"Let me help you up." The man reached down only to pull back when Marie whimpered and shrank away in terror. He hunkered down to a crouch. "I promise I won't hurt you," he reassured her softly.

"What are you?" she whispered.

"I appear to be the one who saved your life. Why, would you have preferred I left you to the tender mercies of our late friend there?" He indicated the body of the youth, splayed in death at an impossible angle.

"No, of course not," Marie declaimed in a stronger voice. "I only wish I could have torn apart that little cock-sucker so easily."

LaCroix smiled slyly. "Oh, but you can. I intend to show you, if you consent."

"You're kidding. How can that be possible?" Marie asked cautiously. "How can you make that offer to me. Why would you want to do such a thing?"

"Why? Well, I have my reasons. How? I can show you quite easily, if you'll just take my hand." He offered it with a soft silky smile.

"What do I have to give up? Nobody gets something for nothing these days, and anyone who says different is trying to unload a bunch of crap," Marie said, her voice thickly laden with suspicious doubt.

"The only thing you have to give up are your mortal chains. Come, don't tell me there is so much in your life you couldn't bear to leave it and start a new one in eternity," he coaxed with insufferable arrogance.

"Eternity? Oh god, you're not some kind of Jesus freak whose church practices tearing out men's throats as some kind of twisted Eucharist? Or as a way of punishing sinners?" she mocked, quite at the end of her strength and functioning primarily on bluster.

"Yes, I can give you immortality, but Raphael's angels won't be gazing down on you. You won't have to follow anyone's rules except your own...and mine. The only thing I require of you is your undying gratitude. That's such a small thing, isn't it?"

He stopped speaking, and looked at her through lambent eyes. "It's your choice, but it must be made now, because this gift will be offered only once. If you refuse, you won't get another chance." He paused. "There will also be no going back," he warned, and rose up on booted feet.

Marie stood before him, shirt gaping open, pants a butchered mess around her ankles. Uncaring of her present state, she pondered his words. Impulsive as always, she threw caution to the winds.

"Yes, I accept."

She rather thought he would take her there, surrounded by the bodies of those who so foolishly had thought to rape her. Instead, he took her and Minnie home, smiling in amusement as Marie ministered to Minnie's wounds after a quick shower.

"Luckily for Minnie, her skin is so thick and loose, the blade only cut skin and muscle," Marie said in relief.

"How very fortunate," LaCroix scoffed.

Marie looked up sharply. "Do I have to remind you what this dog did for me? I would be dead without her."

"No, you would be dead were it not for me," LaCroix corrected. "Do you think I only happened by at the last moment?"

"What do you mean?" Marie gasped.

"I saw the whole thing. The walk with your dog that strayed too far from safety. The approach of the young hooligans. It was all very...entertaining." He smiled, his eyes hard and cold as ice. He didn't mention the suggestions planted not only in her mind, but in those of the boys. They actually hadn't been bad kids but, unknowingly guided by a master manipulator, had participated in a monstrous act like puppets on a string.

"Why didn't you step in sooner? I was almost raped!" Marie rose swiftly to her feet, coming at LaCroix, fingers clenched into claws. He fended her off easily, forcing her backward against a wall, and restraining her when she refused to be calm.

"Now listen, Marie! Do you think I made tonight's offer on a whim?" His eyes changed again, while his voice roughened to a harsh rasp. "I had to see how you would handle yourself as a mortal before I made any decisions about what to do with you." He kept silent about the other nights he'd spent watching her. She'd be shocked if she knew the lengths and distance to which he'd gone to secure a new companion for himself.

"What I found was a strong desire to live that wouldn't give up without a fight. Do you think I want some Pollyanna sweetheart wringing her hands and crying, 'Help me!'? Of course not. You have spirit, and believe me, you are going to need it again and again." *If only against me*, he thought to himself with a chuckle.

"Let me go!" Marie bit out between clenched teeth. "You're hurting me!"

LaCroix retained his grip, but loosened his hold as he shifted the weight he held against her.

"You're mine. I'll hold you when I want, and I'll hurt you when I want also."

He nuzzled and breathed hot puffs of air against her neck. Marie's muscles lost their stiffness as she helplessly began to melt against the curves of his own hard body. His tongue flicked out and traced the side of her neck. She shook her head, confused, knowing that she should be angry at his high-handed treatment. Was he doing something to her mind? She was never one to go in for rough foreplay, yet she found herself becoming strangely aroused. Her blood felt as if it were singing in her veins. Every time he laid his tongue on her skin, the pulse there

would leap. He seemed to be wresting a response from her body that her mind wanted to reject, but was powerless to.

He released her arms, which lowered slowly to her sides. He dipped his head forward to taste her lips, which she held shut tight in token resistance, even as her body began to lift itself toward him.

She tipped her head back and whispered, "I don't even know your name."

"No, you don't," he admitted softly, and slid his tongue between her now parted lips, avoiding the split area at first, only to surge back to taste the blood that still seeped weakly from the wound. His tongue glided back into her mouth and encompassed hers with its warm sensuousness.

Her fingertips began to stroke his strong neck, as she gave herself over to the kiss. She moaned as LaCroix lifted the edge of her robe, to cup the cheeks of her derriere. She twined a leg around him, attempting to get closer, to, in essence, meld her bones with his.

He lifted her and carried her out of the bathroom and into her small bedroom. He laid her down on a homemade quilt decorated with entwined rings, leaving her, briefly, to peel off his shirt. He laughed as she reached out for him.

"Patience, my pet. We want to savor this time; after all, it's not every day one becomes immortal." He reached down and parted the sides of her fluffy robe. His cobalt blue eyes darkened.

"Whoever said these robes weren't sexy failed to take into account what they conceal." He tenderly molded the curve of a full breast in the palm of his hand, and then glided that hand along the ridges and valleys of her torso, stopping at her warm center.

Marie whimpered in frustration. "Please..."

"Please what? Touch you, kiss you, what?" LaCroix teased, flicking a nipple with a fingernail.

She squealed. "Please, anything...God! Just anything, now!"

He darted down to taste the soft places that were filling up with blood. Marie was quite breathless as she was taken over by intense feelings of pleasure and, sharply, pain. He bit the inside of her inner thigh, where a thick artery pulsed with her blood. He drank deeply, regretfully pulling back all too soon. He had to remind himself to stop before he drained her dry. He didn't want her crossover to be swift. He wanted her to be bound to him by blood and passion, as much a decision of hers, as well as tied to him by vampire magic.

He wound a hand through her silky hair as he watched Marie fall into a deep sleep. Tomorrow would be soon enough to leash her to him for all eternity. Unlike Nicholas, this one would not be leaving unless he ordered her to go. This one would be totally his, without a Janette to distract her. She moaned in her sleep and, reaching out for him, drew him in to lay beside her so she could curl up into his side. *Yes*, he thought, *this was definitely the one.*

Marie awoke with a start. She was alone. She laid her head back against the pillows.

"Thank god it was only a dream." She said aloud. Just then, Minnie began to whine, puppy-like, outside her bedroom door. Marie opened it to find Minnie sprawled on the floor, worrying at the large bandage wrapped around her chest.

"Oh my god, it was all real!" She put her hands against her cheeks, horrified. She remembered the man who had helped, and then made exquisite love to her. Except that it hadn't been sex, not really. He hadn't... But, he had... She ran to the bathroom, and stood in front of the full length mirror. Lifting her leg, she saw them, two neat puncture marks on the inside of her thigh.

"What am I now?" She moaned, then carefully lifted the heavy curtain over the bathroom window. The sun stung her eyes, but she didn't go up in smoke.

"Not to mention I still have a reflection, so I guess I'm not a vampire." She speculated, relying on movie lore for her facts. Her eyes darkened in rage.

"He said he would make me immortal. He lied, the pig!"

In her fury, she smashed the mirror, and began a campaign of destruction through her house. Finally, she dropped into an exhausted heap in the wreckage, to wait for him to show up again. Soon, her eyes drooped shut, due to her massive blood loss. That's where he found her, 10 hours later.

"Gracious, we've been busy." LaCroix taunted, amused.

Marie's eyes fluttered open. "You. I thought you weren't coming back." She said, disbelieving.

"Lucien LaCroix, at your service." he executed a courtly bow. "I promised to make you immortal. I have been many things, done many things. But I have never reneged on a blood vow." He clapped his hands together. "Now, are you in the mood to go out?" He held up a bag with the name of any exclusive boutique printed on it. "I brought you a present."

He drove her to a lake, alongside which, to her amazement, a table was set up with a creamy cloth and candles. Champagne and an unmarked bottle, chilled in a bucket. There was no food to be found.

Marie looked askance at LaCroix. He just smiled and popped the cork to the champagne bottle and poured her a glass of the frothy concoction. He then poured out a measure of rich ruby liquid from the other bottle.

"To eternity my sweet." He toasted, raising his glass in salute to hers. Marie slowly raised hers to his, and took a sip.

"Ugh! It's flat." She shuddered, setting the glass down.

"Flat, are you sure?" LaCroix lifted the glass to eye level. "I still see bubbles dancing around, try again."

Marie picked the glass back up again, and tried a small sip, wrinkling her nose in distaste. She said, "Well, it tastes like it has no flavor."

"Hmm, why don't you try this?" LaCroix handed her his glass. With her eyes trained on him, Marie accepted it and drew in a small amount, paused, then spit it out.

"My god, that's blood." Repelled, she wiped her tongue with her napkin.

"Well, of course it is, what do you think vampires drink? Port wine?" He savored a mouthful. "Cheeky," he remarked, smiling at Marie's expression of horrified disbelief.

"I, uh... rescind my decision. I've changed my mind. I mean, the blood... I just didn't realize." Marie got up and turned to the water. LaCroix rose from his chair and spun her towards him.

"Now look here, not only were you given the chance to accept my offer once, you were also only allowed to decline it at the time I made it. You were warned. Do not make the mistake of thinking this is a game," he bit out.

"Well, I guess I just didn't understand. I decline now. I didn't understand that there were rules." She tried to turn away from him again, but he held her forward, clenched between his big hands.

"Don't walk away from me Marie. You're mine now!" He roared and pushed her backwards on her rump. He grabbed her by the shoulders to pull her up to him, but she struggled, fists beating ineffectually against his chest. Marie kicked him in the shin. Amused, and yet not, his eyes glowed yellow and dangerous, his movements becoming frightening in their very deliberation. Marie took an involuntary step back, as he revealed his extended canines.

LaCroix struck like a snake, capturing the side of her neck, forcing his way past the layers of skin, into the carotid artery. She screamed in pain, then in ecstasy as her blood began to pulse down his throat. He held her upright as her strength fled, leaving her as limp as a rag doll. He drained her close to dry, her heart barely able to pump what was left.

Carefully, he brought her across, leaving just enough blood in her veins so that the Hunger would be fierce when she awoke. He then loaded her in the car to drive her home.

Minnie growled, smelling the taint of blood on her mistress and on him. LaCroix exerted mind pressure to silence the dog.

He laid Marie tenderly on her bed, took a knife, and sliced along the fang marks. He smoothed her hair, then left her to be discovered by the neighbors.

Noon, the following day, Marie's body was found when her Master released the command he held over Minnie, who began to howl in despair. A meter reader on his rounds called 911, and the police broke open the door to a scene of utter chaos. The destruction Marie had wrought played an important part in the assertion by the police of robbery/homicide. Not to mention the articles of value removed by LaCroix, to lay credence to this assumption.

The neighbors were questioned, but none remembered seeing anyone enter or leave Marie's house. Curiously, after Marie's body was loaded into the ambulance, Minnie disappeared before Animal Control could claim her.

Shortly after Marie was brought to the morgue, she also vanished, notably before an autopsy could be performed. Her parents were outraged, raising a huge public outcry. But no traces of Marie could be found in either Kansas City, or the rest of the state of Missouri. Soon enough, another news story captured the fickle attention of the media.

Three high school teenagers from Hickman Mills had disappeared briefly, only to be discovered in the compactor of a Laidlaw garbage truck. Alarmingly, there was a remarkable lack of blood in one of the boys, and none spread out underneath or on him.

Thousands of miles away, Marie awoke in the cargo hold of a plane carrying goods into Toronto. LaCroix was there to soothe her, along with Minnie, who whimpered and yelped with glee.

Her Hunger fierce, Marie grabbed Minnie and buried her fangs into her neck, as the dog howled in protest. LaCroix broke them apart.

"Come now, have you ever seen a vampire dog? It's not a pretty sight." He smiled affectionately. "How do you feel?"

Marie wiped the blood from her mouth, her eyes darted around animal-like.

"Hungry, very hungry. Where are we?" she demanded aggressively.

LaCroix decided to indulge her. "We're almost to your new home," he explained.

"Home? My home is in Kansas City," she sneered.

LaCroix's eyes reflected his sudden change in mood. "You're home is with me, in Toronto. Got it?" He paced over to stand in front of her. "How many times are we going to have to go over this Marie? I'm beginning to lose patience with you."

Enraged, Marie launched herself at him, too much a fledgling to control her vampire temper. Too late, LaCroix realized that she didn't know her own newly altered strength, as they crashed through and out the underbelly of the plane. The dog, along with everything else in the hold, was sucked out into the night air.

"Minnie!" Marie cried in alarm, releasing LaCroix. She glided over to the dog, not even comprehending that she was flying thousands of feet over the Earth. Marie grabbed Minnie, holding her fast. She looked up when LaCroix spoke.

"Quickly, follow me. I see red on the horizon. Fortunately we're just about where we need to be." He led her from the air to the front door of the Raven, just as the first rays of dawn were inching their way across the ground. He pounded hard on the door, demanding entrance.

Janette hurried to open up so as to see about the commotion. She stared at the woman who stood next to LaCroix, holding a massive black dog, in utter stupefaction. LaCroix pushed his way past Janette to pull Marie in behind him.

"Are you mad? Who is this?" Janette exclaimed. "You can't bring her in here," she protested.

"Janette, I have had no sleep for literally days, do not exasperate me with useless questions. Marie needs someplace to stay until I can find her a place of her own. Your apartment will do."

Janette snorted. "My apartment? She can stay in the wine cellar with the others."

"Marie is under my protection; don't forget your manners, or your obligations to me," he warned in a stern, fatherly manner.

Marie's brow grew wrinkled at this exchange.

"LaCroix, what do you mean, a place of my own? Won't you be staying with me?" Her voice conveyed her distress, which had increased due to her uncertainty. "Why did you bring me across, if you're just going to abandon me?"

"Stop whining!" LaCroix remonstrated. "I will always be with you, but I dictate when. Are you truly worried that I will abandon you?"

She nodded affirmatively.

He beamed. "Well, that's gratifying. The answer is no, I shall never forsake you." He kissed her on the forehead.

Marie relaxed, a sweet smile on her lips. "As long as we are understood."

LaCroix placed a hard hand under her chin and stretched out her neck, so that she had to stare straight into his eyes. He said, "What is to be known is that you are my thrall who will do precisely what I tell her. Now put down that damn dog!"

Marie dropped Minnie right on LaCroix's feet. He clenched his teeth, striving to contain his temper.

Janette put a soft hand on his forearm. "Give her time, she is still much of a child to our ways."

LaCroix turned to his elder 'daughter', who took an involuntary step backward. "Ah, but all bad children must be taught to respect their seniors." He tapped a foot and pointed to a spot in front of him. Marie set her jaw, and stood her ground. "Marie," he warned, "come here."

Marie looked at Janette, who subtly directed that she should comply. With a sigh, she walked over to him. "Am I going to be spanked now Daddy?"

Despite himself, LaCroix let forth a small grin. "No, you'd enjoy it, probably. It's time for some ground rules, Marie. The first one is, 'It's best not to piss off LaCroix'; second, 'Take cover if you do.' The others we can make up along the way."

He turned to the French vampire, who had held an unconscious breath.

"Darling Janette, make up a bed for our little spitfire here." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and see if you can rustle up some kibble for this damn wolf-hound of hers."

"Yes, of course, I always have kibble in my stores. I'll just go get it." She sniffed. "Are you insane? Whoever heard of a vampire with a dog?"

"Minnie stays," Marie declared protectively.

"Of course Minnie stays," LaCroix soothed. "Were you raised by heathens Janette? How could you scare our young friend here? Oh, I forget, you actually

kind of were, is that not correct? Nonetheless, you will see to all of our needs, we are quite exhausted." He yawned and laughed when she flounced out.

She came back presently with a bowl of raw hamburger, which she set down with a bang in front of Minnie, who devoured it all immediately, her appetite, among other things, irrevocably changed by the earlier actions of her mistress.

Janette also carried a bottle of her special 'vintage', which Marie snatched from her hands, uncorked, and began to empty down her parched throat. Janette grabbed the bottle.

"Easy cherie, you will cramp your stomach if you eat your first meal too quickly." LaCroix gazed questioningly at Janette, who shrugged and said, "I recognize the signs."

She gave the bottle back to Marie, who drank from the contents at a slower pace until they were completely exhausted. She wiped her mouth and smiled sheepishly at the female vampire. Soon a familiar lethargy filled her limbs.

"Onto the sofa," Janette directed. LaCroix lifted his sleepy enfant and ignored Janette's instruction, he chose instead to carry Marie to the other woman's bed. Janette sighed in disgust and made do on the sofa, she decided to leave LaCroix to his own devices.

LaCroix opted to share the bed with Marie cradled in his arms. He ignored the incongruity of the sweet action with his normal, less than sentimental nature. Which is how Janette came to find them wrapped up in each other's arms at sun down.

Once again, Marie was ravenous. This time The Master shook his head at the bottle held in Janette's hand.

"It's time she learned to feed properly," he declared and, with a gesture, indicated that Marie should follow him out of the club. He looked around to make sure they were unobserved, then he and Marie took to the night air.

They flew to a deserted part of town, where a homeless man sat huddled before a trash can fire. The weather in Toronto was not the same as in Missouri. Unfortunately for the man, he was alone. The two vampires settled to the ground, then wandered over to the man, who eyed them suspiciously.

"What you want?" he demanded drunkenly.

"Only to share your fire," LaCroix supplied, while Marie remained silent. Her eyes were wide open with hunger, lips raw from being worried repeatedly between brand-new fangs. She clamped her lips together, so as not to give herself away prematurely.

The man's expression narrowed at the strange behavior of the woman who stood before him, but he was too inebriated to care for long.

"Suit yourself," he invited roughly and turned his attention back to the bottle in his hands.

"Thank you, I shall," LaCroix said, menace obvious in his intent.

Too late, the man realized his fatal error. LaCroix held him to the ground, while Marie covered him. Her fangs extended with a piercing sweet pain. The derelict screamed as Marie found his throat, and due to her inexperience, tore her

way into it. She stopped a fountain of blood which rose in the air with her lips. She sucked and lapped greedily at her meal. Marie was filled with sensations she never received from a simple morsel of food.

The blood flowed all through her body, and filled her with the essence of his life, as well as the food her body craved. The bottle of blood paled in comparison to the emotions of the Feeding. She snarled at LaCroix, and hissed in rage when he claimed his turn. He held her off with one hand while he fed; on occasion he would stop and snap at her when she would try to push him aside to reclaim her prey.

LaCroix stood up, his face flushed almost to ruddiness from his meal of blood. He smiled in satisfaction and wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. He took a breath, in preparation for Marie's next lesson.

"Now listen, Marie, you must take care, when you feed, not to bring the victim across. That is why we must sever the spinal cord," he said, and snapped the neck of the corpse. "But, most importantly, you must conceal the true nature of his death."

So said, he kicked a hole in the bottom of the trash can, where the metal was thin. He arranged the body in such a way that the dead man's coat caught on fire. Soon, he was engulfed in flames.

"We must always conceal the signs of out presence. Do you understand?"

Marie nodded, ashamed of her earlier loss of control. She remembered the man's pain, and vowed never to be as callous the next time she took a victim.

"How do we feed every night? It's not possible to always kill like this, is it? I mean, the bodies would begin to multiply," she speculated in true consternation. "How do we keep from starving?"

LaCroix sighed. "Do you remember the bottles at Janette's?"

Marie nodded.

"Well, we have friends in the Medical field who supply us with old blood. I know it's not the same. You felt that thrill of the kill, correct?" Marie nodded. "But we have to take caution in these times. Especially if we choose to live in one particular place. It's not like the old days, when it was so easy to get rid of the bodies." LaCroix predicted with confidence, "You'll get used to it."

The next evening found Homicide Detective Nick Knight enjoying a night off from his usual nocturnal grind. In a rare mood of nostalgia, he decided to visit Janette at the Raven. She looked up from her receipts, and smiled in pleasure at the handsome vampire who stood before her. After a moment, a knowing look crossed her face.

"Nikola, how nice to see you. What can I help you with? Murder? Safe house for a mob informant?" She snapped her fingers together. "I know, you want me to rough some one up? I just might enjoy that, you know." She smiled prettily. "Certainly, you are not here to visit moi."

He planted a kiss on her full red lips, and crinkled his eyes in amusement.

"Do I need a reason to visit a friend?" he asked as his hand caressed her hair. Janette rested her cheek against his palm, her lips curled upward in apology.

"Sorry Nikola, it has been a busy evening, and to top it all off, my cash register has malfunctioned and I'm having to do my receipts by hand." She exhaled in disgust. "Please take me away from all this!" she beseeched mockingly.

The smile died on her lips when she glanced toward the door. Nick turned to find LaCroix stood in the entrance with a lovely, albeit pale, small woman with brown hair the color of pecans. She stood, her fingers curled inside his elbow, her side pressed against his, in comfort.

LaCroix walked in the direction of Nick and Janette, the woman gliding sylph-like at his side. Nick realized with horror that this woman was newly brought across; moreover, that LaCroix had done the deed. From his expression, LaCroix seemed on the verge of laughter at some private joke. Nick assumed it had something to do with the new vampire.

"My dear Nicholas, I would like you to meet someone." He drew Marie from his side to stand in front of him. "May I present Miss Marie Delacroix." He waited, certain of the response sure to come.

Nick obliged him and said, "So now you establish your ownership in an overt way. Tell me, are we now to be introduced to a whole Brady Bunch of Delacroix, with you as the proud poppa? You disgust me, always having to have complete control. It's a wonder you allow anyone to breathe without your consent." He sneered in contempt.

In her fury Marie's eyes suddenly shifted to dark gold.

"Delacroix happens to be my Christian name," she declared, her stance proud and confident. "The similarity just happens to be a happy coincidence since I now accept that I belong <u>with</u> him and not <u>to</u> him. I don't mind who knows that I am bound to him by blood and eternity." She linked her fingers with the ancient vampire's. "If it weren't for LaCroix, I would be dead now. He saved me, and my place is at his side for as long as he wants me." She kissed LaCroix's fingertips with tenderness.

Nick wore a look of profound sadness. "You will only have misery with him. In the end, you will find that you are only an empty shell, minus your eternal soul. The only claim you can now have to anything Christian is that damned name you brought over with you." He gave Janette a chaste peck on the lips, and turned to leave. His final words were once again for Marie. "When you leave him, and believe me, you will eventually," he asserted firmly at the negative shake of her head, "come to me. I will help you because I have done that very thing, with success." He glowered disdainfully at LaCroix and walked out the exit.

Marie pursed her lips and held a thoughtful look on her face for a moment. Then she mentally shrugged her shoulders and beamed beatifically into LaCroix's eyes.

"Lucien, may we please gather Minnie and make our departure now?" Her smile promised future pleasure and her hands glided across his back in a gesture of desire and devotion.

"I want to be alone with you," she murmured softly.

As they entered the apartment, LaCroix crossed the spacious expanse of the living room to open the windows to the night sky. For obvious reasons, he never failed to pull them shut before he either left, or when dawn approached. He walked to the refrigerator, and retrieved a bottle from within. Unlike Nick's, his fridge only contained bottles of human blood. This would prove to be important to Marie in the future. They appeared in the same way that his apartment was always impeccable, while he was gone for the evening.

Such day to day tasks were menial, much too far below LaCroix for him to give them any consideration. A Being as old and powerful as he was had his advantages. Marie benefited from having been brought across by him. She could feel the power he had given her singing through her veins. She was not the ordinary fledgling.

LaCroix stood with his back to her, in front of the window. He drank straight from the bottle. He felt her settle behind him and rest her cheek against his back. She wound her arms around his chest, and caressed the muscles there lovingly. Marie raised up on her toes to press soft kisses on the back of his neck. He stood motionless for a time, while her movements became more frantic, agitated. She bit his ear. "Turn around!" she commanded.

His shoulders stiffened. In a flash, he spun towards her in a movement faster than the human eye could have followed. Draped against him as she was, Marie was flung across the room and onto the sofa by his sudden action.

"I give the orders around here, Marie," he said with deadly seriousness.

"LaCroix, don't overreact."

He contemplated her, then said softly, "Come here."

Marie moved in close to him. He pulled her up onto her toes, to cover her lips with his own. The kiss deepened, and they began to pull impatiently at each other's clothes. Their vampire passions caused their fangs to extend and their eyes to burn brighter than the moon. Their lust, as they gazed at each other, was all too real. Minnie merely lay against the door, bored with the proceedings.

LaCroix reached up and tore Marie's dress from neck to waist. Breathing heavily, she stepped away to glide the silk over her shoulders to puddle on the floor at her feet. She wore no undergarments. Her transformation into vampire had given her the firmness of youth.

Wild and feral as they had been before, they now looked at each other with reverence. Lucien, as lover, found himself at a loss. His indulgences weren't normally sexual. He tended to save that for when he truly felt the need. With Marie in a consciously provocative stance before him, he once again felt that need.

He gently gathered her into his arms, and laid her on the black satin sheets covering his bed. He left her to disrobe slowly, his ardor increased as a reflection of the emotion in her eyes.

"Come to me, Lucien. I'm so empty without you," she entreated.

He lowered his body to cover hers; his palms stroked her from hip to breast. His head dipped to capture a nipple between full lips. Suctioning softly, he drew a keening cry from Marie. As she arched her back cat-like and tangled her fingers in his short hair.

"I have waited so long to feel this way," LaCroix groaned. "I can't wait any longer."

As he claimed her for his own, he felt Marie's teeth gently puncture his skin as she drank deep and with profound satisfaction from his neck. Enraptured, she offered her neck to him. The exquisite feel of the duel penetration heightened her ecstasy. She gave herself completely to it as she shuddered all around LaCroix, who cried out his own release.

They lay gasping in each other's arm's, momentarily sated, only to succumb again and again, throughout the night, until dawn arrived to claim them both in Sleep.

LaCroix smiled and drew Marie close, at peace for the first time since he didn't know when. He didn't know if it would last, nor did he care. All that he knew was that the incessant longing for tenderness had presently been stilled.

Even as he had bound Marie to him by blood, he felt whisper-thin tendrils of his own soul twining intricately with hers. The thought brought him a small measure of unease, which he quickly suppressed.

Tomorrow he would make Nick see that, with Marie, things had changed irrevocably. He still wanted Nick; the Master would not be denied. But, the Master had decided it was perhaps time for patience. He had eternity after all, and a most diverting way to spend his time. There was no rush. He smiled, and wondered if Nick would actually believe that. Or, even, if he did himself.

Fire

I wait.
Surrounded by the sweet scent of roses.
Alone.
Your eyes blaze in my memory.
My soul ignites in anticipation of your touch.
I stand, eyes closed, wishing and desiring in vain.
I hear soft footsteps.
Whirling around, I gaze in astonishment into sky blue eyes.
His lips crinkle in a smile as warm as a summer day.
Defiance roars to life.
I step closer to him, fingers reaching up to tease sandy hair.
My lips extend an invitation and a dare.
Gauntlet thrown to the ground.
Then picked up.
As we both play with fire.

Puppet Strings

Jane Marsden struggled with the bag of groceries cradled against her chest as she tried to fish her card key out of her purse. It was so frustrating. She had to use the key to get into the building, out of the combination mudroom/ mailroom, and then into her own door. This could be hell if she had very much to haul into the apartment building. Not that it did any good; last month there had been a murder on the first floor.

However, none of this was occurring to Jane at the moment, her primary thought being *damn, Damn, DAMN!* as she felt the Italian loaf break in half, and the lid pop off the deli container of marinara sauce.

"Let me help you with that," a soft masculine voice offered.

Jane's eyes widened in surprise as she took in the stranger. He was dressed in an expensive black leather trench coat. She glanced down to find his feet encased in snakeskin boots. It was somewhat curious to her that he wasn't sweating profusely, hot as it was. She paused, common sense warring with convenience. *What the hell, what can it hurt?* she thought, figuring she had nothing a classy man like this would want to take.

Jane handed him the groceries, first making sure the sauce wouldn't leak out to ruin his coat. He followed her through the doors, up the elevator and to her apartment door. As she turned to take the groceries, he shifted to a more secure hold on the bag and said, "I've come this far. You wouldn't want to lose everything this close to the kitchen, would you?"

She smiled in gratitude. "Well, if you're sure it's no imposition," she said, then turned to open the door. He entered after her, hitting the door with his foot. It banged shut, shaking pictures on the wall. Jane stopped and spun around when she heard her groceries hit the floor. A scream locked in her throat at the transformation wrought on the features of his previously kind face.

His eyes shifted from cobalt blue to golden fire. A sneer twisted his mouth as it parted, revealing long curving fangs. A blur of movement and she was pinned to the wall, her head shoved to the side while he buried those fangs into her neck. She screamed in horror and pain, tears leaking from her eyes as she felt her life draining away. Her last conscious sight was of him pulling out a handkerchief to wipe the blood, her blood, from his lips.

Marie sat in the flower garden behind the old two story brick house that LaCroix had bought for her, several months after her crossover. At first, he had been unwilling to see her gone form his sight for more than a few hours at a time. Soon enough, after ensuring himself of her complete obedience, he began to disappear for sometimes days on end. To appease her, or perhaps to alleviate himself from having to hear her complain, he presented her with the house. Typically, it was chosen without one word of input from Marie, who would have preferred a smaller dwelling.

Surrounding her were all manner of floral life in abundance. She sighed. She knew that carpeting the ground on either side of the stone walk were violets, beyond the violets were lilies of the valley. Snap dragons stood up like exclamation points here and there in columns of pink and yellow. The garden path led to a circular series of trellises, upon which roses tangled. Every color of the rainbow was represented in Marie's garden. Not that she could appreciate any of them. In the twilight world in which Marie passed her existence, all the garden colors registered as varying shades of gray, sometimes tinged with red.

Knowing this saddened Marie, LaCroix had floodlights installed to illuminate the entire grounds like a football stadium. To Marie, the artificial light cast an eerie, otherworldly spell over the garden, turning the natural beauty of the blossoms into plastic flower perfection. She hated it, preferring the portraits she'd had a professional take during her daily Sleep. She knew how every section of the garden appeared at every stage of the day, by virtue of chemical process. It galled her that she could no longer verify the color on paper with the reality of nature.

Marie sat in a garden chair, pondering the change in her life, specifically the change in LaCroix. She had begun to be plagued with doubts soon after it became obvious that his attention was starting to wander from her. It was all too apparent that LaCroix needed a lot of stimulation to hold his interest. After 2000 years, he bored easily. It was disturbing to Marie that he needed new diversion so soon after her introduction into his life. She had no way of knowing that this was quite normal for the ancient vampire. He was like a child who wanted to play constantly and never heard the word no. He also liked a challenge. Marie was much too far under his thumb to be that, she had to admit. No, she was just another possession to him.

She drew a hand through her heavy brown hair and flipped it over her shoulder. She, too, was bored. ,After all, who did she have except for LaCroix? Marie narrowed her cocoa eyes. Maybe it was time to remedy that sad circumstance. Someone to talk to, beyond LaCroix, should go a long way toward filling the gap his absence created in her life.

However, a mortal wouldn't do. Simple conversation at dinner would entail the mortal as the main course. She giggled, imagining that little scenario. Helpless, the mortal would struggle as Marie impaled him with her thirsty fangs. She would pause. "So, from one bloodsucker to another, did you find being a lawyer fulfilling? I speak in the past tense because, of course, you won't be sucking any blood any more." She would ask sincerely, shaking him as his eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body grew limp. The sad reality was that her imaginings weren't too far off the mark. Everyone knew what sex brought to mortals: death. Was there any sort of dealing with her species that didn't involve that grim commodity?

Marie know only two other vampires by name. Now was as good a time as any to establish some contact. Perhaps it would anger LaCroix enough to make an appearance. She licked her lips in anticipation; that, at least, would be something. She stood and took to the air. She had followed Nick enough to know how to find

his loft. Not all of her nights had been spent in the garden. She was careful not to alert him to her presence.

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Detective Nick Knight and his good friend Dr. Natalie Lambert were enjoying a quiet night at his apartment. Politely, Nick strove not to wrinkle his nose at the smell of the omelet Nat was preparing. It wasn't just his vampire sensibilities. Even as a mortal, so many centuries in the past, he'd hated eggs. Nat slid the eggs onto a plate, then walked over to her usual perch on the floor in front of Nick's sofa. She playfully offered him a bite when he sat down next to her. With a grimace, he declined.

"Come on Nick, how will you become mortal if you're not willing to take baby steps?" she teased, half serious.

"Thank you, but no, I don't desire to eat the beginnings of baby chicks." He attempted, gamely, not to gag.

"You know better than that. These eggs were never fertilized. Open the tunnel for the choo choo." Fork raised, she made train noises and aimed for Nick's mouth. Nick caught her wrist in mid-air, gently forcing the fork back onto her plate. He shook his head at her.

"You're incorrigible, Dr. Lambert." He dipped his head towards hers to give her a quick peck on the lips. "But I forgive you."

Their beepers went off simultaneously.

"Conspiracy," Nick remarked. "If we weren't here together, neither of our beepers would go off," he joked.

"You're getting paranoid in your old age, Nick. It's not a conspiracy, it's Murphy's Law," Nat countered dryly.

Nick and Nat were leaving his loft when Marie arrived from the air. Curious, she wondered at the identity of the lush redhead, who stood with him in conversation by his Cadillac. When they left separately in their own vehicles, Marie decided to follow. Both cars arrived at their destination at the same time.

"You two living together now?" cracked Nick's partner, Don Schanke.

"Come again, Schanke?" Nick queried.

"You know, you two are like two peas in a pod. Here's Nick, Nat must be two steps behind. Heck, I'm your partner and I don't see you near as much!"

"Jealous, Schanke?" Nick quipped.

"Aw, forget it, come into the living room. I'll show you the body." Schanke carefully skirted the scattered groceries and knelt beside the body. "Wait till the press gets a load of this." He gently tilted the head so Nick could see the twin gaping holes in Jane Marsden's neck. He sucked in a breath and immediately began running through his mental vampire roster. He couldn't imagine who would be so blatantly careless. Suddenly, he became aware that Schanke was still speaking.

"Again with the vampire. Is it my imagination or does Toronto need an exterminator? Something like 'Fangs R Us'." He snapped his fingers. "Hey Nick, you still there buddy? Anybody home?"

"Sorry, Schanke, I was thinking about the case." Nick supplied, contrite.

"Man, Nick. I'm going to have to get you a book on attention deficit disorder. Sometimes you're spacier than Pauly Shore."

Nat joined them, pulling off a pair of rubber gloves. She said, "Well, there is definitely massive blood loss. But no clue as to how the killer got the blood out so cleanly, other than the puncture marks on the neck." She glanced at Nick. "I'll have to test a few samples at the lab and see what I can come up with."

"Sounds good to me," agreed Schanke. "I think I'll go over and ask the neighbor if she can remember anything else. Boy, was she freaked out earlier."

"Well, that's understandable, Schanke. She lived right next to the murder victim," Nick shrugged.

"Ah yes, but remember, there was a murder in this building last month also," Schanke answered, lifting one conspiratorial brow.

Natalie snorted. "The previous murder involved a single shot at close range from a double-barreled shotgun. There was blood everywhere. In my humble coroner's opinion, I hardly think they are related." She knelt down to the corpse again, to ready it for transportation to the morgue.

Nick began to circle the apartment in search of clues. In a corner, partially concealed by the living room drapes, was a flash of silver. A sick feeling tightened Nick's gut. With a quick glance to be sure no one was watching, he dipped down to palm a huge silver ring. He had often seen a similar one on the little finger of LaCroix's right hand. Distracted, he didn't notice the gleam of gold on the other side of the window. He walked over to where Schanke and Captain Cohen were deep in conversation. He didn't mention the ring.

The captain turned to Knight. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you the Crown's going to be all over this one like ants on a chocolate cake. Jane Marsden was the daughter of a local magistrate. We need a good clean collar, fast." She paused to fix a tight stare on Schanke. "It's gotta be air tight, no screwups."

Schanke raised his hands. "Hey, when do I ever screw up?" he protested.

"Did I mention you by name?" the captain baited as she left.

"I just don't know what to say when she says stuff like that," Schanke grumbled half-heartedly to Nick, who didn't answer because he was busy following the Captain out the door.

"Hey, Knight, where do you think you're going?" asked a frustrated Schanke.

"To check out a lead," was Knight's response as he walked out the door.

"Lead? What lead? Hey Nick, you can't just leave me here with all this!" his partner complained.

"Sorry, Don, I'll get back with you later," Knight said with an apologetic twist of the lips.

"Aw, come on, Nick...Knight!"

Nick's first stop was at the Raven. He broke up a tête-à-tête Janette was having with a mortal, whom she was obviously in the process of mesmerizing. The man's eyes were somewhat glassy and fixed steadfastly on Janette. Insinuating himself between hunter and prey, he broke her careful spell. The mortal beat a hasty retreat, never guessing his extremely close brush with death.

Nick slid the ring on the counter in front of Janette.

"Where is he?"

Janette frowned prettily. "Couldn't you have waited? I'm so hungry for a good hot meal," she complained, watching the mortal rejoin his friends.

Nick tapped the ring on the table impatiently. "Come on, Janette. LaCroix. Where can I find him?" Nick insisted.

"Oh, you know LaCroix, he's on one of his little retreats," she supplied irritably. "God only knows where he runs off to when he wants to play." She looked beyond Nick's shoulder. "You would be better off asking her."

Nick turned to face Marie, whom he hadn't heard approach. He gave himself a hard mental shake. He couldn't remember the last time he had been caught so unawares. He inclined his head politely toward her.

"It's good to see you, Marie. You wouldn't happen to know where I can find LaCroix?"

Marie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, he comes and goes by his own schedule. I learned early on not to question him." She smiled tightly. "It only pisses him off." She picked up the ring. "What are you doing with Lucien's ring?" she queried innocently. "He never takes it off." She slipped it onto her thumb. Nick gently took hold of her wrist and retrieved the gaudy bauble. She shrugged negligently.

"Whatever. I'm sure Lucien will reclaim it from you later." She pursed her lips seductively, trailing one finger under his chin. She drew in to kiss him softly on the lips, caressing the silky feel of his hair under her fingertips. Nick jerked back in surprise. He blinked rapidly a few times, stepping away from the bar.

"Please, you know where to get me when he shows up." He directed his comment to encompass both Marie and Janette. "It's imperative that I make contact." He tossed the ring from his left hand to the right, then tightened his fist around it. Working his mouth, as if to say something in addition, he apparently changed his mind and walked out the exit.

Marie swung her head towards Janette.

"Okay, he's gone. Tell me what you know," the young vampiress demanded.

Janette snorted. "What makes you think I would tell you anything I wouldn't tell him? You know LaCroix. When he disappears, he's like the mist."

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Two nights later, another murder occurred in a park on the opposite side of town. Like the previous victim, fang marks were displayed prominently on the neck of the young prostitute. Massive blood loss rendered the body an empty vessel.

Nick was beginning to scramble, his sense of justice warring with the very real need to conceal the existence of the vampire community. If something wasn't done soon, he feared the Enforcers would make an appearance. He decided to pay Marie a visit.

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As Nick pushed open the gate in the fence surrounding Marie's house and gardens, he heard a low growl. Marie's dog Minnie stood a short distance away, lips curled back from canine fangs, the fur standing up behind her shoulders. Nick's lips twisted in a grin and he began to talk in a calm, soothing voice to the dog. She whined and dipped her head. Nick reached out a hand to scratch Minnie between the ears, her eyes half-closed in ecstasy. She then flipped onto her back, exposing her belly to him. He obliged her by stroking the beast on the chest.

"You're such a faker," he chuckled.

"Maybe you just know how to stroke a woman the right way," an alluring female voice commented from behind.

Damn, she did it again, Nick thought. He would love to know how she learned to conceal her presence so effectively. A trick perhaps taught by LaCroix that he hadn't seen fit to teach his supposedly beloved protégé. Perhaps it was because he had wanted to keep that thread of awareness that linked them together from being severed. Such an ability would not have destroyed the blood bond, if only it were that simple. No, it simply would have given Nick a useful tool, an added advantage. LaCroix wouldn't have tolerated that for a second. He liked to have all his toys within reach.

"Wool gathering?" Marie murmured as she stepped in front of him. Nick's eyes widened. She was wearing some sort of loose flowing thing that blew in diaphanous folds around her legs. It was nearly transparent, and as the moon shone through it, he could see the curve of her breasts and the supple flatness of her belly.

Marie turned away to lead him to the flower gardens at the back of the house. The soft evening breezes lifted her hair to flow like a ribbon in her wake. She may as well have been nude. Or rather, Nick wished he could slip the silky fabric away from her body to expose it to the silvery sphere in the sky.

Such sharp arousal had become foreign to Nick, as used as he was to denying himself. His relationship with Janette was more off than on, and Natalie, sweet Natalie, was forbidden fruit. LaCroix had made his position clear as to what role Natalie could safely play in his life. The love he felt for Nat was fragile, a tender enticement.

What Nick was feeling for Marie was pure lust. Who knows, Marie may have even been feeding him those emotions. *No*, he thought, *when have I ever had to be tricked into wanting a beautiful woman?* he reflected ruefully. In any case, it didn't help his libido that Marie was gazing at him with a distinct glitter in her eyes.

She bent forward to fondle Minnie between the ears, casting all thoughts of his current case from Nick's mind as her breasts were all but bared to his view. The blood rushed from his head into parts containing no gray matter. She straightened, giving him a knowing look. It was crazy, but at practically the same moment, all intelligent thoughts left them. Instead, a heat woke within them both, blinking sleepy, hungry eyes.

Marie was feeling dangerous. The cat was away and she wanted to play with his prize mouse. It was a shame LaCroix had to miss this performance. She rather thought he would enjoy seeing her cast aside her fears to act on pure instinct. Then again, maybe he would be annoyed that Nick dared to play with his newest dolly.

Little did she or Nick know that he missed nothing, watching from a secure position a short distance away. He concealed himself from them in all manner. He was, to say the least, intrigued thus far.

Marie played out her little tableau in utter silence. Nick had no words she was interested in hearing just now. Her focus was on the growing evidence of his desire and the sexual ache which clawed through her. There was a spell in the night air, luring him, and Nick decided to give in to it. He locked blue eyes with brown and reached out his hand to rub his thumb across the hard nub topping a breast.

Marie sucked in a breath and stepped closer still. She cradled his face between her hands, gliding her lips across his until they parted, to allow her tongue to caress the moist inside of his mouth. His fingers twined through her hair with his right hand, while he pulled her into the strength of his embrace with his left arm. They locked in that pose for endless moments, exploring each other with lips and tongues. Marie suddenly pushed him away. They stood apart, their chests heaving as the air was sucked in with harsh rasps.

"I would say I'm sorry, but I —" Nick's words stopped short as he watched in fascination while she reached down to tug the gown up and over her head.

Both Nick and LaCroix gasped in surprise, Nick audibly and LaCroix in silent pleasure. The vampire master could only hope that she would finish this in the garden he'd had planted for her, since he couldn't follow them into the house undetected.

Marie reached out and unclasped Nick's belt buckle. She undid the button of his pants and slid the zipper down. Nick placed his hands over hers to stop them, then lifted them to slowly slide the buttons away from the fabric of his vest, and then again to his shirt. He glided the garments over his shoulders as Marie accidentally pricked her tongue on suddenly extended fangs. She knelt before him, naked, to pull his shoes and socks off his feet. Nick made short work of the rest of his clothes, standing in full arousal before Marie. She took full advantage of

her position in front of him, to his delight. When had anything felt as good? He couldn't remember.

LaCroix watched all this, stunned. He never thought Marie would defy him in such a manner. Or that Nick would respond so completely. Marie tended to act like she was a personal possession of his. Well, okay, maybe that was him. But she never demurred, never threw any fusses or fits of rage. She was quite... tame. At first, she hadn't been, oh no, she had given as good as she got. Somewhere along the line though, all the fight seemed to drain away. Like maybe she walked in a state of fugue. He leaned in to get a better view of the floor show. Thank god the house was out in the country. Wouldn't the neighbors have gotten an eyeful so far? She had certainly shaken off her timidity.

Nick couldn't take the exquisite torture any longer. He drew Marie up into a vampire embrace. His fangs tenderly scored the surface of her skin, and his eyes fluttered shut as Marie's blood coursed down his throat. The beast within roared in exultance. Too long denied, it threatened to seize Nick's self control. Marie hissed in warning, pushing him away at the same time he pulled himself back.

"Gently now, love," she whispered. "Take it slow." She twined her fingers within his to draw him forward and against her once again. As she kissed him, her tongue surged into his mouth, tasting her own blood. She whimpered when he tugged his mouth away to cup her buttocks and knead them gently.

"That's so incredibly much better," she gasped in pleasure, then, dismayed, "Where are you going?"

He stepped back to stride over to the trellises. He swiftly gathered roses and tossed them onto a bed of violets which carpeted the ground. He gathered Marie into his arms, gently lowering her to the ground atop the blooms. Carefully settling his weight above her, he caught her lips in a deep kiss. The smell of crushed roses permeated the air.

As Marie wrapped her arms around Nick to snare him closer to her, the thorns from the roses pierced her skin. She hissed, her eyes glowing golden fire. Nick claimed her in that instant, briefly, then withdrew. She snarled and tried to pull him to her again. He fended her off and rolled her away from the roses so that she was now laying on her belly, only on violets. Blood streaked her back. Nick began to lick away the salty elixir. His tongue blazed a hot trail against her skin. He massaged the wounds to make the blood continue to flow, sucking at all the little puncture holes. Marie felt the euphoria of a vampire kiss all over her body. She flipped onto her back, grabbing a rose stem to slap it across her breasts, scattering rose petals all over her body.

LaCroix groaned softly aloud. The couple, sprawled out on the ground, were oblivious. A herd of elephants could have come charging through the garden. They simply would have rolled to safety. He briefly considered joining the fun.

Nick spread the blood arching across Marie's breasts with his hands, then laid his bloody palm against her lips. Her tongue glided over the callused surface, savoring the coppery taste. He bent his head to lap away the smeared blood, then

moved further down her body. Marie felt herself float off as she felt an orgasm build, her body arched and grew stiff under Knight's touch. He rose up and impaled himself inside her and in her neck once again. He swallowed convulsively, in time to the fierce pounding of his body against hers. Marie groaned, the sound of her voice arousing her still further, until she shoved his mouth away from her neck so she could pierce him with her fangs. The instant she penetrated his skin, Nick found his own release. Nick continued to pound into Marie's body as he felt one orgasm after another grip her body, clenching him within.

At last they lay, shuddering, in each other's arms. Nick pulled Marie on top of him to tuck her head under his chin. She went softly into his arms. After a few moments, they both slept.

LaCroix stepped from his hiding place to stand over them. He really wasn't sure what he wanted to feel. Part of him desired to be jealous, but an even bigger part recognized that this was his opportunity to draw Nick into his little circle, once again. Marie had completely astounded him this evening. He wasn't certain he wanted to give her up now, especially after witnessing her uninhibited performance with his prize stud. Sharing might not be too unsavory a concept, after all.

He knelt down to bestow a wet kiss on Marie's lips and opened up the mental link to encompass Nick and Marie both. As a lark, he briefly brushed his lips against Nick's, who opened his eyes in shock. LaCroix smiled sardonically.

"My, my, what naughty children."

LaCroix stared into Nick's disbelieving eyes as he hovered over the couple curled together on the ground. LaCroix reached out a hand to draw the mass of brown hair from Marie's cheek, tucking the unruly mess behind her ear. At the touch of his fingers, Marie sighed softly and cuddled more deeply into Nick's arms.

"This certainly raises some questions, doesn't it, Nicholas?" LaCroix queried. "I mean, do I run you through to avenge my poor wounded ego?" He raised his brows. "Or do we break open a six pack and compare notes, like the good old, dear friends that we are?"

LaCroix cupped a breast of the sleeping Marie. "She is definitely an uninhibited little slut, is she not?" His voice was without a hint of rancor. He spoke conversationally, as if discussing the weather.

Nick gently shook Marie, to wake the peacefully sleeping vampiress. He spoke urgently into her ear. "Wake up Marie, we have company." He rose to his feet, with her nestled in his arms.

He was less concerned about his naked state than he was about his formerly vulnerable position in the bed of roses and violets. Marie finally opened her brown eyes and smiled in pleasure at the sight of LaCroix. His expression was one of indulgence.

"I am so glad to see you, my love," Marie breathed happily. "I was so lonely without you."

"Yes, I can see you are pining away, for wont of my company," was his mocking reply.

Marie glanced down at her own nakedness, and at the bare arms which encircled her. She sighed in sleepy satisfaction. Once again, she astounded her master. Previously, during their time together, she would fall all over herself to please him. Not only did she not drop into this accustomed pattern; unbelievably, she acted as if she didn't care. She pulled herself from Nick's hold and retrieved her silky gown to slide it casually over her head.

"Why are you here. LaCroix? I had the distinct impression you had lost all interest in this house and its inhabitants." She stepped in front of him, a sultry smile crossed her lips. "Or do you like to watch? How long have you been hiding in the shadows?"

LaCroix's good will abruptly vanished. He clamped fingers of steel beneath Marie's chin.

"Enough! Do not presume to question me. Know only this, you do nothing which I have not allowed to happen. I could have ended this little game at any time this evening." He tightened his fingers cruelly. "I suggest you remember that, and to whom you owe your life. You wouldn't want my friendship to end." All of a sudden, LaCroix found himself flying across the garden to land in a thorny bush. He fought his way to his feet, heedless of the flesh being shredded. He snarled at Nick, whose eyes had shifted to that all-too-familiar vampire shade.

"Why don't you try fighting someone closer to your own strength?" he taunted. "Or do you get off by roughing up women?"

"Do not tell me how to discipline my pet, Nicholas. Unless, perhaps, you'd like a lesson of your own." LaCroix growled as he backhanded the still naked former knight across the face.

Marie shrieked in anger and launched herself at the spiky haired vampire. Her attack was completely without finesse, tiring her out quickly. She shouted obscenities and pounded her fists in a frenzy, all over his body. LaCroix grabbed her wrists hard enough that a sharp crack filled the air when the bones in one snapped like a twig.

"Stop this nonsense at once, or I will truly hurt you," he commanded in a quiet tone.

Marie stopped struggling. She cradled her temporarily injured wrist gingerly. She stood, with her head bowed, for a few silent moments. When she lifted it, there were scarlet tears in her eyes.

"Do not treat me like a dog," she said with dignity. "God knows I am devoted to you, although I don't know why. As a mortal I wouldn't have tolerated such treatment for a heartbeat. I begin to think I was freer before. Ironic, isn't it? That in casting off my mortal chains, a stronger set has taken their place." Her voice was sad, but not defeated. "I'm starting to understand Nick's desire for independence." She turned to Nick, who was now partially clothed. "I never did ask, why are you here, Nick?"

He spoke, his eyes on LaCroix. "I came to talk about the murders that have been all over the papers. It appears as if we have a careless vampire in our midst." He reached into his pocket for the ring. "Can you explain how I came to find this little bauble in the apartment of the first victim, LaCroix?" He tossed it at LaCroix, who caught it as it struck his chest. "How can you be so foolishly careless? Is this some new game devised to force me to cover for you?" he sneered. "Well, no more. This mindless killing ends now. Or, so help me, I'll let you suffer the consequences of your own actions, whether or not it endangers the vampire community."

LaCroix looked up in genuine bewilderment. "Believe it or not, I have no idea what you are talking about. I've been in the mountains for the past month."

Nick snorted. "Don't be coy. You don't do it well. I have never seen this ring off your hand. So explain how it just so happened to show up in Jane Marsden's apartment!" he shouted, his voice filled with contemptuous disdain.

LaCroix's eyes glowed with flickers of fire. He grabbed Nick by the throat and lifted him off the ground with one hand. His superior strength was readily evident.

"My god, you two are really trying my patience tonight." He held his recalcitrant 'child' aloft with considerable ease. The muscles in his biceps barely flexed. LaCroix's lips twisted cruelly; the way his eyes moved over Nick showed that he'd found him wanting. "You think you can question me? Why, since you stopped taking human blood, your strength is one tenth of what it used to be. You are puny next to me; you couldn't lick a postage stamp." He laughed derisively. "But since you have asked so nicely, I'll tell you what you want to know." He released Nick and turned away to settle on a cast iron garden chair. He examined his fingernails. "The fact is, I don't know how that ring came to be off my finger, or how it came to be found in someone's apartment. Perhaps I lost it while...hunting." He shrugged. "You figure out the mystery, Sherlock. After all, you're the detective, n'est-ce pas?"

Nick stood with his hands on his hips, in his bare feet, shirtless. He shook his head. "That's it? No elaborate tales to exonerate yourself. No easy alibis?"

LaCroix lifted his lips in a brief smile. "That does seem to be the irony of truth, is it not? That the truth is always simple, it's the lies that grow into complex knots."

Nick just looked at LaCroix, reluctantly hearing the truth in his words. He sighed. "Okay then, who would want to frame you, or should I say expose you, this way? The only thing I can think of is revenge. Can you think of anyone who would want to seek that against you? I know that is a question which would, properly, take years to answer, but we are in a bit of a time constraint here." He couldn't resist the jibe which, sadly enough, wasn't far off the mark. LaCroix had made many enemies over two millennia. It was staggering to think of the evil acts he had committed in one century; twenty centuries were incomprehensible. *Well, maybe not, my hands aren't exactly squeaky clean*, Nick thought.

"Do not look at me like that, Nicholas, you know I am not the Marquis de Sade. I merely choose not to concern myself with the petty lives of these mortals whom you value so highly. What is the point of becoming involved with potential prospects for dinner? Their lives are mere hiccups in our existence." He spoke negligently, in a matter of fact tone.

Nick gazed at LaCroix out of sad blue eyes. "That, Old Friend, is why I will never come back to you. You've completely closed off your heart. I doubt if you could truly love even us," he indicated himself and Marie, who stood without comment. Nick drew on his shirt, and stepped, sockless, into his shoes. "Much as I would like to let you sink on your own, I'll have to figure out a way to help you. If you can think of anything at all, contact me." He turned to Marie, to gently kiss her on the lips. His eyes were as soft as a summer day, smiling with tenderness. When Nick smiled, his whole face glowed. Marie responded like a flower to the sun, a reaction which annoyed LaCroix almost as much as the fact that Nicholas never turned that kind of expression to him.

For more years than he was willing to say, he had only been on the tail end of contempt from Nick. Sometimes he wondered if that was truly the reason for his obsession with Knight. That he wanted what Nick had so clearly expressed he would never again give his old master, simple affection.

He only allowed himself to reflect on this briefly, as he watched Nick get into his old Caddy and speed away. He stopped Marie when she began to walk into her house. Marie pivoted to him with a sigh.

"Now what, Lucien? The sun will be up in a few minutes; haven't you had enough for one night?"

"How did it feel when Nick fucked you? I saw the whole thing, you know. It was quite...stimulating," LaCroix provoked.

Marie tossed back her hair, forcing back the shiver of awareness at this admission of his voyeurism. She answered him carelessly.

"It felt dangerous, and so fierce. You weren't there, as usual, and I was so ready. Nick was like a peach, one good squeeze..." She broke off, laughing. "Isn't that what you always tell me, just let it all go? Well, tonight I did. For the first time, I truly felt the power of the vampire, the pleasure and ecstasy of having someone in my grasp. I had no constraints, no guilt to hold me back. I was free!" She threw her arms open wide and danced in a circle, and cast him a come-hither look over her shoulder. "I'm still free. Tell me, are you going to take that away from me now?"

She didn't wait for his reply, but stepped indoors. Minnie appeared from around the corner of the house to follow her mistress. After a brief pause to glance at the red tinted light of approaching dawn LaCroix, too, followed.

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Etienne Graves gazed down with satisfaction at the shell of the formerly young and vibrant woman he had picked up in a cheap bar. Her struggles had been quite intoxicating, sweetening the taste of her blood as it coursed down his throat. He was a tall handsome man, with short spiky hair that stood up in a similar fashion to the vampire who had brought him across one year previously. He was dressed in black: black shirt, leather trenchcoat and trousers. He also wore snakeskin boots.

He had gone to the bar and made quite a production of dancing with the young woman who had come to the mistaken assumption that Etienne Graves was the Night Crawler. He'd spent quite a bit of time over the past year imitating LaCroix's accent and inflections. He made a passable doppelgänger, perfect for stage two of his plan of revenge against his hated master.

He reached into his pocket and drew out a matchbook from the nightclub, the Raven. He tossed it onto the ground close to the corpse. Chuckling, he strolled back to his Jaguar, unaware of golden eyes that followed him in the dark.

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Back at the Raven, Janette was preparing to shut down for the night when the door to the club banged open.

"Merde!" Janette cursed as, startled, she knocked over wine glasses she had been attempting to clear off the bar. She set her jaw in annoyance, cursing herself for not locking the door. "Whoever you are, we are closed!" She glanced up at the thin young vampire who stood, heaving great gasps of air into his lungs. It was either affectation or sign of great stress, since he was obviously past the stage in which he needed to exercise for physical fitness.

"Bobby, whatever has you in such a state?" Janette questioned in consternation.

"It's...it's LaCroix..." The boy was tongue-tied in extreme agitation.

Janette's expression abruptly sharpened. She grabbed Bobby by the shoulders.

"Calm down, breathe." She nodded, simulating deep even breaths, setting a rhythm for the boy. After a moment, he relaxed and was able to speak in a more normal tone.

"I saw him!" Bobby exclaimed.

"You saw whom?" Janette prompted. "LaCroix?"

"No. A man dressed like him. He murdered a girl on Sunnyside Beach, and left this behind." He held up the Raven matchbook. "He set it up so the cops would know a vampire killed her. I fixed it, though." He grinned, pleased with his own ingenuity. "I threw the body in a building incinerator, after I followed him to see where he went. The cops'll never know it was one of our kind who did it."

Janette walked around the end of the bar and draped her arm along Bobby's shoulders. She smiled at him. "You did the right thing, you protected your kind and that's the most important thing."

Bobby puffed up like a rooster. He made a point of pleasing the lovely French woman. She'd recently brought him across when she found him drained and near

death after an attack by another vampire. Gazing down into his young face, Janette had felt a rare surge of compassion. When he had looked up at her with eyes as blue as the sky on a clear day, memories sparked of other, similar blue eyes, causing her to tenderly draw him into her embrace.

He had awakened, grateful, and would have fulfilled her every desire, even without a blood bond. Janette tended to treat him as a beloved younger brother.

Janette spoke again. "Do you know who it was, if it wasn't LaCroix, Bobby?"

Bobby nodded his head. "Yeah. It was that millionaire vampire LaCroix brought across last year, the one whose family was kidnapped and murdered after his Change. Etienne Graves."

Janette permitted herself a small snort of disgust. Everyone in the Community knew about the so called murder of Grave's wife and daughter. He had drained and savaged them in the grip of his first Hunger. LaCroix had brought him across and then left him to fend for himself.

So now it appeared Graves was after revenge. Now the Vampire Killings made sense; he wanted the world to know about the existence of vampires. He would have to be stopped. She ushered Bobby out and locked the door.

She took to the night air, arriving minutes later at Nick's loft. She entered through the alternate entrance. Her devoted protégé followed at a close distance. Nick had arrived mere moments before from Marie's house. Janette raised her brows at his disheveled appearance. He was not pleased to receive company at this late hour.

"What do you want, Janette?" Nick grumbled irritably. He yawned and drew a hand through his sandy colored hair. His eyes widened at the sight of the skinny kid who followed her into his apartment. He looked to Janette for explanation. She looked behind her, setting her mouth in a moue of exasperation at the sight of the boy.

"This is Bobby Jones," she introduced with a resigned air. "He saw the Vampire Killer tonight. Tell Nick what you saw," she prompted. Bobby quickly related all that he had seen and done. Nick grew quickly alarmed, but his disgust was for LaCroix.

"This is all LaCroix's fault," he fumed. "He does whatever he pleases with no thought to the consequences. Now we are all at risk and, as usual, I have to clean up the mess." He stalked back and forth, ranting in his fury, his irritation growing at the realization that he was trapped in his apartment by the spreading rays of dawn. He passed the day in impatience, unable to slip into Sleep. He settled Bobby and Janette in his bed. They had considerably less difficulty in drifting off, secure in the belief that Nick would fix whatever was wrong.

Nick decided he would need some help. He couldn't call his human partner, Schanke. No. Only one person could or should help to confront Graves. He would have to call LaCroix. It was time he took responsibility for his part in all this mess.

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As soon as nightfall had safely blanketed the city, Nick sought out LaCroix at radio station CERK. He quietly entered the sound booth as LaCroix imparted his normal words of joy over the airwaves.

"So, dear listeners, can anyone define the word devotion? Some say it's cleaving body and soul to your significant other." His voice matched the mocking expression on his face. He snorted indelicately. "I say it's doing whatever you must to protect the people you...love. To protect them from danger and, on occasion, from your own worse impulses." He spotted Nick by the door. "Well, well, dear friends. Once again a visitor has come tiptoeing in for a visit. I think I'll pull up a chair for him and get him a glass of lemonade, while you ponder my words of wisdom." He switched off the microphone, randomly selected some music, then gazed expectantly at Nick.

"To what do I owe the honor? I had the distinct impression my company would be the last you would seek any time in the near future." His eyes belied his next words. "I truly feel blessed."

"Cut the crap. I've come here for your help," Nick said impatiently.

"Explain why I should have any desire to help you, who have no respect for my property?" LaCroix taunted.

"As much as you infuriate me, I don't have time to play your little games." Nick quickly related all he knew about the actions of Etienne Graves. LaCroix passed from amusement to fury. How dare one of his puppets cut the strings? This one would have to be taught a permanent lesson. Not to mention Grave's affront to his personal dignity. Impersonating him, indeed!

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Etienne Graves still maintained the mansion secluded deep within 300 acres of forested land that he had shared with his wife and daughter. It was of similar style to the historic landmark, The Grange, only on a less grand scale. He'd had it built shortly after the birth of his little princess, so he'd have something of true significance to pass along after he was gone. Instead, Graves had buried his beloved family in the front yard, with two stone angels standing guard over each grave.

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LaCroix was reluctant, but Nick convinced him that it would be better if he spoke to Graves alone first, without the distracting presence of the blood bond.

"It is now obvious to me that you are able to mask yourself from even me," Nick insisted. "Simply hold back until I call for you." He paused. "I would like to know how you managed that little trick."

LaCroix lifted one corner of his mouth in wry amusement. "My dear Nicholas, you know you only have to ask and I would give you all you desire, and more. With no reservations," he replied flippantly.

"You have nothing I desire or need. Stay back until I can speak to Graves first. I want to hold you back as an advantage, in case it becomes necessary to call in reinforcements," Nick ordered carelessly.

"I would watch my tone if I were you, Nicholas," LaCroix warned. "I've been in a bit of a mood. Don't give me a reason to teach you a lesson."

"Don't try to frighten me with your threats," Nick replied without a trace of fear.

They arrived at Grave's mansion from the air, rendering the front gate useless. Nick didn't knock, he simply turned the knob and entered the dimly lit foyer. Apparently, he was expected, what with the open door and the lighted security panel indicating the alarm was off. He could detect another vampire, other than LaCroix , who was waiting for a signal outside. No mortals were in occupation. He breathed a little more easily. He didn't want to endanger anyone unnecessarily.

He found Graves in the living room, seated before the TV, watching the evening news. He saw the spiky-haired head, so like LaCroix's, lift as he stepped in, unannounced.

"I don't recall hearing a doorbell ring," he said as he rose to his feet, swiftly turning to confront the handsome vampire detective.

"The door was open, so I just come in," Nick explained smoothly. "I'm Nick Knight, with Metro Homicide." He flipped his badge open to flash it at Graves, then replaced it in his coat pocket. A complete artifice, considering the illegality of the detective's entrance. He was simply trying to lull Graves into a false sense of security, although he knew full well that the other vampire knew that he was one of his own kind. It always reminded Nick of two dogs meeting on the street, bobbing their heads and sniffing each other in recognition. Creatures of the night always knew other, similar creatures. It was the nature of their Beast.

"I just came by to inform you that the Crown is interested in reopening the investigation of the murder of your wife and daughter. There is talk of exhuming their bodies. We're hoping a new autopsy might reveal further evidence." Lies, all lies. Graves knew; moreover, Nick knew that Graves knew it. This was an intricate dance in which they each tried to figure out the steps.

Nick casually walked over to the fireplace, taking a picture off the mantel. He gazed down at the pretty, framed scene depicting a family romp in the snow. "They were quite lovely. Truly a tragic loss," he murmured in genuine sympathy. He surprised a look of utter violence on the wealthy vampire's face, quickly masked.

His voice came out in a rough growl. "Don't think you can talk to me of them." His lip curled. "I know who you are, and to whom you belong."

"I belong to no one, save myself," Nick said with force.

Graves looked beyond Knight and sneered. "I might have known you would be too much of a coward to face me first yourself, LaCroix!" He spat out the name like a hated word.

Nick turned and exhaled in vexation. "I thought I told you I would call when I need you," he bit out.

LaCroix's eyes dismissed Nick. "I'm not exactly the most patient of men. Timidly waiting in the wings just isn't me." He strode over and grabbed Graves by the throat, cracking vertebrae as he flexed his grip.

So much for subtlety.

"What foolishness makes you think you can endanger me! I will always know the actions of my 'children'. Planting evidence that links vampires to the Raven is dangerous to all of us, not just me. You risk our total exposure." His eyes blazed like coal, while razor sharp fangs extended wickedly. "You will not make the same mistake again." He tore into Graves' throat savagely, weakening the fledgling markedly, then tossed him into the fireplace, within which a raging fire blazed. The vampire shrieked in pain and rage, while he struggled his way out of the inferno. His face was a ruin of burned flesh, making him look as if he had crawled out of the fires of Hell. He staggered to LaCroix, grabbing hold of his shirt. His strength seemed pitiful until he looked up into LaCroix's face, revealing hatred and insanity.

He surged upward and buried his fangs in his Master's throat, laying the flesh there open. Tit for tat. Blood spurted from his jugular to arc high in the air and splatter against the wall across from LaCroix, who thrust Graves away while Nick grabbed him from behind, slamming him into the wall. He sagged to the ground, unconscious.

Both Nick's and LaCroix's heads snapped up at the sound of a woman's scream. It was Marie calling for help in one of the upstairs bedrooms. They flew as one onto the upper balcony, and dashed into the room from where the screaming came. The door slammed behind them to the accompaniment of high feminine laughter.

"Fools!" she taunted. "Even as vampires, you are too eager to rush to a lady's defense. You would be better off looking to your own safety. Think about that as you work on your tans."

To their extreme horror, hundreds of tanning bulbs flashed into blinding brilliance. The skin of LaCroix's neck immediately began to smoke. They frantically began scrambling for an exit, but the room was reinforced with a grid of chrome alloy steel. They could perhaps have torn their way through it eventually, but not before the damage from the bulbs had reduced them to ashes and memories. Time was not on their side. Thinking quickly, Nick threw LaCroix to the floor, where at least there wasn't any simulated sunlight. LaCroix tried to resist in a mindless instinct for self preservation. The upper layers of skin on his exposed hands and face were beginning to bubble up with blisters. Nick was faring much better, due

to his repeated efforts to become human, not to mention his exposure to the rays in his own tanning bed in his loft.

"Listen to me, or you will die."

His former master ceased his struggles, looking expectantly up at Nicholas. Despite, or perhaps because of, everything which had gone between them, he knew he could trust Nick with his life. He also suspected that Nick knew, deep in his heart, that LaCroix could always be trusted to keep his child safe from any outside, permanent harm.

Nick bade LaCroix to lay on his stomach and tuck his hands beneath. The detective draped his body over the supine vampire, after he'd removed his coat. He laid the coat over his head and shoulders, covering both himself and LaCroix. They laid there, cheek to cheek for what seemed like an eternity. Neither dared say a word until they heard the door creak open.

"Now!" Nick shouted and pulled LaCroix up with him. They rushed at the being framed in the door. They dove through the opening, crashing through the banister railing alongside the balcony. Instinct made them swoop up like bats before they could slam, face first, into the floor stretching beneath them. They landed on the floor of the living room, where Graves stood before the fireplace. The being from upstairs jumped from the balcony to land on all fours behind LaCroix.

"Look out!" Nick warned urgently. LaCroix turned to face a gibbering female vampire. Spittle hung from her open mouth. Limp, straw colored hair clung in oily clumps to her head. Her eyes gleamed with a feral madness. She appeared to be a young girl in her teenage years.

Nick gasped in sudden understanding and horror. He recognized the girl from the family photo he had admired earlier. This thing was Graves' daughter.

"How? What did you do to this girl?" he asked, repulsed.

"She was the second human I fed from." Graves lowered his head in shame. "Her mother was the first. I wasn't taught to take my victims with any finesse. Hunger was the only thing I understood. My daughter went mad from the ferocity of my attack." He walked over to the girl, kneeling down to stroke her hair, like he was petting a dog. She whimpered in devotion, wrapping her arms around his waist, nuzzling his back with her cheek. His voice broke on a sob. "When she woke up, she was changed." His lips curled back over his fangs, as he hissed in absolute hatred. "I hold you completely responsible, LaCroix. You offered me the world, immortality, power. But you didn't tell me how to use them!"

"You wanted, no, demanded those gifts. Don't bitch to me if you think you got a raw deal! I'm no baby-sitter, and you aren't what I consider a prime candidate for an eternal companion. The only person I would even consider offering my protection..." He spoke with contempt. "Your problems are your concern and beneath my notice."

Graves broke free of his daughter to grab the poker from the fireplace, and threw himself at LaCroix in a sudden attack. LaCroix was expecting this obvious

response; he fended off the blows easily and tore the poker from Graves' grasp. With an evil grin, he began bouncing Graves around the room like a punching bag.

"You started this, Graves, now take your punishment like a good boy. A smarter man would have known better than to mess with me," he said in a sadistically satisfied tone.

Meanwhile, across the room, Nick was dealing with problems of his own. Driven by insane fury, the girl launched herself at Nick. She scrabbled at him, kicking and biting, rending his skin with talon-like nails. He fended her off repeatedly, pushing her to the ground, only to have her come at him again and again. Finally, in frustration, he retrieved a long thin splinter of wood from the ruined banister. Once more, she attacked. This time he speared her through the eye, jerking it out of the ruined gelatinous flesh with a quick flex of the wrist. She fled through the house, howling in pain. Nick turned back to LaCroix's struggle with Graves. With a single thrust, he used the splinter again, stabbing Graves through the back, the end poking out of his chest.

The millionaire vampire toppled to the floor, his head making a loud *thwack* as it struck the surface. Both men stood, gasping in exhaustion. They looked at each other with understanding. There was one final task which must be performed, to solve the problem of the vengeance-crazed vampire once and for all. A solution which would ensure no resurrection.

Dawn would be approaching soon, so they needed to work quickly. They gathered rope, lashing Graves arms to his sides, and his legs together. He was almost assuredly dead, but they weren't taking any chances. They placed him outside on the roof, so the first rays of sunlight would incinerate him instantly.

From their high perch, they watched as a vehicle crashed through the gate and roared up the drive toward the house. It was Marie in her modified Jeep Cherokee. It resembled a small minivan, with its side windows taken out and paneled over. If she were trapped, it would work as well as the big trunk in Nick's Caddy. She screeched to a stop at the front door.

The smell of smoke wafted on the air.

"LaCroix! Nick! Where are you?" she cried frantically, as she ran into a room that was fully engulfed in flames. She hissed in abject fear, fire being one of the few things which can strike terror into the heart of a vampire.

"Marie, we're here," Nick called as he entered the house in a dead heat, LaCroix close on his heels. They recoiled at the flames licking thirstily at the walls. Marie threw herself in LaCroix`s arms, in relief.

"Thank God. I was so afraid. Don't ever do that again!"

LaCroix raised a brow. "That being...?"

"Leaving me alone to bite my fingernails, while you run off to be manly."

LaCroix shook his head in amusement.

"Um, I hate to interrupt this tender moment, but in case it has escaped your attention, we're about to have our choices of death by fire. I mean, the <u>house</u> is on fire, although I don't know how that happened. And the sun is coming up soon."

He ushered them out the door to Marie's Jeep. Nick took to the wheel, while LaCroix and Marie piled into the back. Concern etched her face when Marie saw the injuries on LaCroix's cheeks and neck.

"What happened to you?" she asked in an anguished tone.

"It's nothing." He dismissed the question and grasped her hand. He kissed the fingertips, eliciting a tiny 'oh' of surprise from her.

"We're here," Nick announced, driving through Marie's picket fence and squealing to a halt in front of her house. Sunlight was inching its way across the ground as they ran, smoking, through the entrance. Nick slammed the door behind them. Far off in the distance, an unearthly scream broke the early morning stillness. The three vampires could feel the agony of one of their own kind die a most painful death, if only in sympathy.

Nick, LaCroix, and Marie watched special news bulletins as it was reported that the wealthy and influential Etienne Graves had apparently perished in an early morning fire. It had completely consumed his mansion. No body had yet been found in the smoldering remains, but unearthly cries had carried on the wind to the houses encircling the huge estate. Experts said the extreme heat from the fire could have completely consumed the body.

Nick returned to the loft shortly after sundown, finally leaving LaCroix and Marie alone together.

LaCroix stood in the garden where he had found Nick and Marie just two nights previously. His wounds had been mild and were completely healed. He had fended off Marie's concern when she'd tried to hover over him like a mother hen. He grinned. It was actually quite nice to find that someone cared.

He heard Marie slip behind him. She slid her arms around his back to rest the flat of her palms against his chest. "It wasn't your fault. Crossing over can sometimes change people for the worst," she soothed.

LaCroix pulled away.

"I don't need your sympathy, Marie. Graves was weak. My mistake was in not seeing that sooner, and dealing with him then. It certainly would have helped avoid this entire annoyance." He turned to her. "Believe me, there are plenty of vampires who've woken up alone, and didn't react like he did."

He cupped her face between his hands.

"You came for me," he whispered.

"It was the blood bond, nothing more," Marie replied woodenly. "You've made certain that I will always be loyal to you," she remarked with bitterness.

"Can you be so certain? I think it was something more."

She just looked at him.

"Admit it," he coaxed. "Your first thought was for me."

"Lucien, what does it matter, since you think only of yourself. Now why would you care if I first thought of you? You burned out any real emotion from you heart a long time ago. I know that's why you left me in the first place. I was a new toy from which the novelty had worn off." Her voice was sad. "All you need

to know is that if you desire it I am compelled to do it. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Well, it's true I may have been a little bored of late. Believe me, that's not exactly new for me. After 2000 years, I feel like I'm constantly searching for something," LaCroix spoke with a heartfelt sigh. "The curse of immortality is that it's just so long. This century alone, I have seen things which have irrevocably changed the world. Things that have rekindled my jaded interest. Such wonders which are commonplace to you, because you grew up with them." He began to pace back and forth. Coming to one of the rose trellises, he ripped a bloom from a vine. As he continued, his fingers dispatched each petal, one by one.

"Even so," he said. returning to her, "people never change. They are always petty and bitter." He shook his head. "Maybe it's because I live entirely by the night, but I seldom find much in the way of grace or beauty." He looked at Marie with earnestness. "Still, after all this time, I want more. Love, perhaps. I never seem to find it, this ephemeral thing that constantly eludes my grasp." His jaw tightened. "If I have learned one thing, it is this: everyone leaves. Simple, right? But true. I try to hold on with both hands, yet like sand they, Nicholas, Janette...Fleur, slip through my fingers." His eyes suddenly glowed yellow, causing Marie to back away from him. "You will not slip away."

Marie's eyes took on a lambent glow all their own. "So, am I to understand that you are allowed to become bored and come and go as you please, while I am to wait dutifully around for your reappearance? Think again, LaCroix. Two can play that game. Blood bond or not, I will not live my life according to your whims!" She spun away from him to stalk into the house. LaCroix followed and grabbed her by the shoulders, spinning her around as she placed her foot on the first step leading upstairs to her bedroom.

"Do not walk away from me," he grated.

Marie threw up her arms to dislodge his hands. "Take your hands off me, you fool." Too late, Marie rethought the rashness of her words and ran up the stairs, tripping on the runner. She landed on her rump. Looking up, she found LaCroix in front of her. She reached out and gave his knees a good hard shove.

As LaCroix toppled backward, he pulled Marie with him. They landed in a pile of arms and legs at the bottom of the stairs. Marie looked at him, and began to laugh with genuine mirth. His expression was still dangerous.

"You think this is funny?"

Her laughter came harder. "Oh, don't be such a blowhard. It's your nose, it's broken. Hold still, I'll straighten it for you before it heals like that." Her hand flew up swiftly, to ease the nose back into position. She could feel the cartilage reknitting under her touch. It still amazed her, this vampire capacity for quick healing.

LaCroix smiled into the chocolate softness of her eyes, and his hands moved to cover her own. He brought her hands up to kiss the palms, then drew the index finger of one into his mouth, gently sucking. Marie's heartbeat abruptly shifted into a new rhythm. His tongue felt raspy and wet against the sensitive pad of the

tip. She placed it beneath a canine, while the fang grew in length, piercing the flesh with a sharp thrill Marie felt all the way to her toes. LaCroix's mouth began to suction again, his tongue working to keep the wound open.

Marie began to whimper softly, fierce desire sweeping like wildfire through her body. She removed her finger and placed her lips over his. LaCroix surged forward, possessing them with domination. She reveled in his power.

The tall vampire rose to his feet with Marie wrapped in his arms. He never broke the kiss, in his trek up the stairs, down the hall, and into her bedroom. He tossed her onto the bed. Marie growled and scrambled onto all fours. Laughing, he bent to shove her flat onto the mattress, straightening to unbutton his shirt.

Marie watched as he slowly removed his clothing. He put her hands on the belt buckle at one point, to let her draw the leather strap out and free. She flicked the button of his jeans through the hole and pulled down the zipper. LaCroix rolled his strong neck back as she reached in to stroke the rigid length of him, bursting apart the seams of the rough denim. As her fingers closed around him, moving up and down, he freed himself from her so he could peel away the cumbersome garment. Marie's hands ripped apart his silk briefs before he could remove them. She had him spread-eagled on the bed in a flash, boots still encasing his feet. When her face nuzzled into his neck, he rolled her onto her back.

"This is my game Marie. Pay attention!" He settled his full weight on top of her, until she ceased her struggles. Without any further word, he ripped her dress in two. She gazed at him, eyes full of passion.

"Please don't stop now," she entreated.

He covered her mouth with his again as her arms snaked up to hold him close. His hands worked to remove her from the ruined dress, beneath which she was nude.

His brow rose in question. She softly smiled her answer. Pupils widening in passion, LaCroix's hands roughly massaged her breasts, soon gentling to soothe the slightly abused flesh. Marie gasped with pleasure-filled pain.

"Tell me what you want," she begged.

LaCroix quieted her with a soft "shush", his breathing slightly ragged as he instructed, "Just relax." Marie's frantic movements ceased. She lay on the bed, looking up to him for guidance.

His head lowered until his tongue reached her navel. It flicked out and circled the tiny opening, then surged forward to imbed itself deep. Marie went rigid, her muscles contracting involuntarily. Once again, LaCroix's hands soothed her skin.

"Don't move," he bade her firmly. Again, she felt his tongue on her flesh, inching its way down her body. He paused briefly at her inner thighs, to irresistibly draw and suck on the soft flesh.

He lifted his head, grinning wickedly. He grabbed her foot, pulling it up to shoulder level. He scored the inside with a long wet trail. Marie had to fight herself to remain pliant. He could have tied her up, but somehow it was more erotic to

know that she alone must strive to restrain herself. She couldn't help but wish he would hurry, her self control was slipping away with increasing speed.

As if reading her mind, he suddenly grabbed the other foot, tossing them both over his shoulders as he took her.

Marie screamed, finding immediate relief. She nearly sobbed as she begged him to continue the sweet torment. LaCroix complied, driving into her with inhuman ferocity. Marie stretched her neck to one side, silently offering him what all vampires needed and desired. Her back arched as he pierced her sharply. She could feel herself flowing into him in a way sex could never imitate.

"Now me," LaCroix demanded, shifting his neck to accommodate her. The taste of him was nirvana, sweeping through her senses to flow over and over until she was aware of only his wild movements inside her skin and the blood flowing like mother's milk down her throat. LaCroix shouted, spilling himself into her and pulling himself over the edge.

He eased to his side, encircling the exhausted woman in his arms. After a moment, he spoke. "Marie."

"Hmm?"

"I want you to promise me one thing only," he whispered against her forehead.

"What's that?" she yawned.

"Don't leave."

"Do I look like I'm going anywhere?" she chuckled.

He drew her chin toward him, so that they were facing. His voice was serious.

"Me. Promise you won't ever leave me."

Marie sighed. "LaCroix, we've already been through this. The blood bond makes leaving impossible. What does it matter if I say the words?" she said sadly.

"It matters to me, I want to hear the words." He exhaled in frustration.

Marie's eyes studied him with seriousness. He saw it in her eyes before she said it, his smile pleased and triumphant.

"Yes, LaCroix, I promise; for what it's worth, I promise." She paused, then, "Lucien?"

"Hmm. Yes, Love?"

"Will you make the same promise?" The words were torn from her at the expense of her pride.

"I promise I will always find you, where ever you go, no matter what," he assured her.

Marie smiled in contentment, until she realized what he had and hadn't promised. She sighed. It would have to do for now. One thing they weren't short on was time. Besides, wouldn't it be dull if she had everything she wanted?

LaCroix was a challenge she craved.

Nick stepped from the elevator into his apartment, surprise crossing his features when he spotted Nat sitting on his sofa.

She spoke softly and slowly.

"You know Nick, I thought you would have checked in sooner about the case."

He paused, then crossed over to the table behind the sofa to place his keys in a small ceramic dish.

"There is no case," he said, tired beyond measure. "It's all over, and the man responsible is dead."

"How can you know that? Schanke only just shot the perp a few hours ago. I know you haven't seen or talked to him, because he just called. Where have you been?" she exclaimed in exasperation.

"What do you mean Schanke shot the perp? Etienne Graves died in a fire."

"Graves? Why are you talking about him? The murderer was some kid named Bobby Jones. It was a copy cat case like that one a few years ago. He was caught transferring the latest victim's blood like he was a donor at the Red Cross."

Nick smiled. "Bobby Jones, huh?"

Nat sighed. "Are you listening? Yeah, why, have you heard of him?" She shook her head and continued, "Anyway, Schanke shot him in the chest when the kid pulled a gun on him. He died instantly. He's really broken up. You know how he feels about having to shoot teenagers," she explained.

Nick's smile widened. "So, there was no doubt, the kid was dead?"

"Hello, Nick, no pulse means not living. That's what they taught us in medical school." Comprehension dawned on her face. "Y-you're not trying to say..."

He shrugged his shoulders, walking to the refrigerator. He retrieved a bottle from within. Nat snatched it from his hands.

"Nick, answer me. Should Jones be alive?" she insisted.

"Well, maybe not alive, but certainly undead." He smirked.

"He's a...a..."

"Nat, you're stuttering," Nick teased.

"Vampire!" she finally got out.

Nick's right eyebrow rose, he opened his mouth to say something, but then Nat's beeper went off. She made the call, eyes on Nick. She mouthed, 'this is not finished.' Her expression grew alarmed, then she shook her head ruefully.

"OK, Grace, thanks. I'll be right there." She hung up the phone. "Guess what?" she asked, knowing full well that Nick knew the answer.

"What?" he said, playing along.

"Bobby Jones' body has disappeared from the morgue."

"Really?" Nick said, in a good imitation of LaCroix. "What an absolute shock." he said with a patented Nick smile.

Two lone figures stood on an aircraft runway, next to a small twin-engine plane. One figure, a woman, wore a long hooded cloak. She handed a similar garment to the other person, a young man in his teenage years.

"Take this, wear it in case the hour grows late before you land." She cupped his cheek tenderly. "Are you sure you have everything?"

The kid ducked his head. When he lifted it, there were scarlet tears in his eyes. "I'm going to miss you, Janette."

Janette bit her lower lip. "I know, mon ami. I shall miss you, too."

"When will I see you again? This isn't forever, is it?"

Janette embraced the nervous young fledgling. "But of course you will."

The pilot approached them.

"Well, it looks like this is it." She lightly brushed her lips across his. He cupped his hand behind her neck and deepened the kiss. Janette broke away with a smile.

"Au revoir, ma petite amour. Take care. You are going to love Paris."

She watched as he climbed aboard and engine kicked into life. She stayed there long after the plane was a small dot in the night sky.

Prey

With trembling hands
She smoothes down her skirt
Alone in a crowd
In the mood for a flirt
The music pulses
The bodies all sway
She's dancing tonight
After a full work day

A partner she spots
Within the pulsating swell
His smile is like Heaven
His intentions are Hell
She asks him to dance
He holds her so tight
Her heart blood the prize
At the end of the night

His lips hover close
To the skin of her neck
Her eyes flutter shut
Nerves all a wreck

The words that are spoken
Softly cause her to cry
"Go home little girl"
Said the spider to the fly.

Take Me, I'm Not Yours

In certain circles, when you're single, Friday nights are for partying. Angela Espere had spent so much time alone since her move to Toronto that she'd forgotten her previous mad existence with the group of friends she'd run with since college. It had been so exciting: good-bye, boring old Midwest; hello, Niagara Falls, CN Tower and skyscrapers with real gold infused in the sheets of glass.

"To hell with it," she said aloud as she tore off the rubber gloves covering her hands. Cleaning the toilets on a Friday night had to be beyond desperate. Restless to the extreme, she cast aside her clothes and stepped into the shower. Gasping, she fumbled with the shower dial, seeking a warmer setting. Soon the water was cozy and warm, a caress against her skin.

As she glided the soapy sponge over her skin, a new restlessness was born. The sponge passed between her legs, causing a breathy moan to escape. She gave herself a hard mental shake and made short work of the rest of her shower, then quickly lathered and rinsed her copper-colored tresses.

She toweled off opposite a full-length mirror. She was proud of her fit form, kept in firm shape due to a strict regimen of exercise. She met her own hazel gaze in the mirror, desire darkening their warmish green color. When was the last time she had felt the touch of another set of hands? Too long for her to recall.

She would go dancing tonight. *That way, at least, I have a chance of getting all sweaty*, Angela thought with a grin.

She strolled naked to the bedroom closet. There weren't many choices inside. She wasn't feeling sleazy enough for the red spandex number a friend had talked her into buying. Of course, the silk suits she wore to work weren't quite the ticket, either. She smiled in satisfaction. There it was, the blouse she never had the courage to wear, at least not without a bra and camisole. It was a pretty, feminine thing, semi-transparent in a blue and black floral print. Without the usual undergarments, Angela felt racy and somewhat naughty. For a woman who had always done the expected, never straying into dangerous territory, she was indeed feeling risqué.

She slithered into tight black jeans and stepped, barefoot, into plain flat pumps. Okay, so maybe she was going to dance, but there was no need to risk a sprained ankle. Now impatient to 'just get on with it', she paused by her vanity table to stroke on mascara and blood-red lipstick. Pursing her lips in a perky smile at the woman in the mirror, she picked up her small purse and headed out the door.

Marie indulged in the mundane. Lead in hand, she was walking through her woods with Minnie. Her pace was a little too slow for the dog, who was trying to stretch beyond the limits of the leash. Marie bent down and unfastened the clasp holding it to hr collar.

"Knock yourself out," she chuckled indulgently as the dog chased after a rabbit. It was a wonder there were any left on the property. Minnie had littered the grounds with their tiny little bones. The dog was voracious and would no longer

eat her usual food. She preferred only the things she herself, or Marie, had killed. She delighted in the hunt as much as its spoils. And, like Marie, the dog didn't care what the prey was. She liked top bring her targets down, hearts pumping hard, to the ground. Marie, however, wouldn't take the blood of anything other than a human. Her system could not tolerate it. *Thank God for bagged blood*, she mused inwardly.

LaCroix was away. Marie had become accustomed to being alone. Fickle as LaCroix seemed to be, Marie couldn't blame him. Freed from society's moral constraints, he lived as he pleased. Most likely he was on the prowl for a new diversion.

Abruptly she whistled Minnie to her side. Two could play at that game.

Angela drove around looking for a nightclub. Dancing wasn't one of her normal pastimes, nor did the people she work with frequent such places. With satisfaction, she located a sign for a place called the Raven. She had to drive around the block for several minutes before a spot opened up for her to park..

She stepped inside and was out of her element immediately. Although everyone was engaged in activities like talking, laughing or dancing, there was an underlying <u>something</u> in the air. She shivered uneasily.

Coward, Angela thought to herself, *this is what you came here to find, an element of possible danger*. She smiled to herself. *Well, maybe not the <u>only</u> thing.* She sat at a corner table and perused the room. Disappointment flooded her when she realized no one appealed to her. She sat up straighter in her chair. The crowd parted momentarily to reveal a stunning woman with dark hair, wearing a scarlet goddess gown, conversing with a tall spiky-haired man. He had a strong profile and a thick well-muscled neck. She guessed his age at somewhere in the forties. A perfect age; at the very beginning of the middle years and past the blush of youth. Angela herself was on the dark side of thirty.

She walked past the waitress, who was on the way to take her order, and approached the bar. She settled on a stool close to the couple to eavesdrop. To her embarrassment, she realized that the bartender had asked for her order more than once. Moreover, the couple had noticed. She flushed red and ordered herself a glass of the house wine. She practically bolted from her stool to seat herself at her previous table.

Angela placed her full attention on hr drink. She became aware that a question was being repeated. She looked up into the cobalt eyes of the stranger from the bar. His lips were curved in a pleasant smile as he asked again if he could sit down. His voice was silky and brushed with a British inflection. Close up, he was even more compelling than from across the room. He exuded power and grace, qualities Angela found stimulating. She smiled and nodded.

"Pardon me for being blunt," he began with a charming smile, "but you don't seem to be in your element."

Angela's smile dimmed slightly, and suddenly she felt quite foolish. "I don't look so much different than everyone else, do I?"

"Quite frankly, yes. Your hair is washed and, I might add, it looks combed. A cut above these kids who find ugliness fashionable," he said as he leaned in closer to reassure her.

Angela beamed in relief. Looking around, she saw what he meant. Dirty limp hair crowned young women who apparently wore no makeup. Angela decided that she hadn't ever seen so many pale faces in one place before. The exception was the beautiful proprietress, who glided around the establishment like a queen.

"So what brings you here tonight? Are you meeting a date or something?" he asked with casual interest.

Angela shrugged. "I came here to dance," she admitted.

He got up and offered her his hand. "Well, in that case ..."

Angela rose nervously. He guided her to the middle of the floor. A sexy, slower tune began. He held her close, moving expertly to the rhythm of the song. She sighed and eased in closer and lost herself in the music. He wore a wonderfully clean and woodsy scent, applied with a light hand so that one had to be standing quite near to detect it.

Abruptly the music changed and shocked Angela from her dreamy state. She looked up into eyes that blazed down at her. Her heart flipped over and her breath came in short gasps.

More than anything, she wanted him to touch her, which he did, winding long fingers through her hair. He leaned into her, let her feel how she affected him. He ran his hands down her back, a moment which caused her to arch involuntarily, nipples straining at the silk.

In a room full of people, she felt his lips claim one of the hard nubs. He suctioned softly, wetting the fragile fabric. Pulling back, he blew lightly on the wet stuff, plastering it to her breasts. The effect was immediate, causing her to throw caution to the wind. She asked him, " Would you like to go somewhere?" Her eyes pleaded with him to say yes.

She knew he wanted her, was on the verge of saying yes. But, all of a sudden, he shut down.

"Really, in this day and age, you're willing to just go home with me? How foolhardy." His voice was sarcastic and raised the hackles on the back of her neck.

As willing as she had been before, would have taken him there on the dance floor, she now despised him with a passion borne of utter embarrassment. The sneaking suspicion entered her mind that he had only been toying before.

"Well, that's enough for one night," she announced. She pulled herself from his arms. She said nothing more and stepped past him to walk out the door. She didn't even give him a lingering last look.

"My, my, you certainly know how to run them off," Janette taunted at his shoulder.

LaCroix glanced down at the French vampire. "Actually, my dear, I saved her life."

Janette's face registered mild surprise. "Are you saying that you turned her down?"

"Maybe Nikola is having more of an effect on you, than you on he."

"Don't count on it, dear heart," he said, a feral gleam lighting his eyes. "If our little rabbit returns, all bets are off. She will be mine, whatever path I choose to take."

Nick sighed. He'd just sat down with a nice snifter of microwave-warmed bovine, VCR in hand, when the buzzer to his apartment sounded. He got up to hit the intercom button.

"Yes?"

"It's Marie, Nick. May I come in?" Her voice sounded a bit tentative, as if unsure of her welcome.

Nick smiled, appreciative of her thoughtfulness. Everyone else seemed to just come in.

"By all means, come on up." He buzzed her in and met her at the elevator door. "What a pleasure. It's been so long. Has LaCroix been keeping you buried somewhere?" He touched the tip of his index finger to the tip of her nose.

"LaCroix who?" Marie queried as she removed her leather jacket.

Nick sobered. "Like that again, is it?"

Marie thrust out her right hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Oh, don't get me wrong! I am not indulging in any angst-filled 'No LaCroix Blues'." She crossed over to the sofa and plopped herself down.

"So, what's on the tube? Bela Lugosi?" Her eyes shone in merriment. "Did you give him any tips?"

Nick hit the stop button. "Actually, he gave me tips on how to sweep in and out of a room in a really creepy way." He lifted his brows in a classic Lugosi manner.

Marie squealed with laughter and emptied his snifter. "Oh, God, Nick, that is really dreadful. How can you stand this swill?" Shuddering all over as if having eaten a sour pickle, she made her way to the refrigerator. On the bottom shelf were bags of human blood. She grabbed one, punctured it , and drained it in seconds. "That's better. At least it gets the taste out of my mouth," she said with relief.

"Make yourself at home," Nick invited somewhat acidly.

Embarrassed, Marie hurried to explain. "My system won't tolerate cow. I've tried other substitutes, but I can only drink human." She smiled tightly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just grabbed your glass like that. It was rude."

Nick shook his head. "No apology is necessary." He picked up another bag and filled two fresh snifters, nuked them, and offered one to Marie.

"Why don't we rewind the tape?" he suggested.

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Angela sighed and twisted her hair into a quick knot which she secured with a barrette. Try as she would, she couldn't concentrate on the papers she was trying to grade. Her passion for teaching Art History had begun to pall sometime after she realized that her students weren't interested in knowledge but rather an easy elective. Her head sank into her hands while she reflected on the work she would have to complete to reach that elusive Ph.D. As it stood she only had a Master's Degree, which threatened to keep her only at Junior Professor status. To her way of thinking, she was at a crossroads, one on the verge of demanding some tough choices.

I need more than this, Angela mused. *I'm not a woman who can exist in a cold, uncommitted existence.*

She got up and walked to the window across from her desk.

Outside, autumn was in the air. The leaves were beginning to turn. In a few short weeks they would all blow off, leaving behind stark naked branches. Another season ending to make way for one in which cold would grip the land for months on end.

"To hell with it," Angela said out loud. She gathered up her jacket and headed outside. Her heels rapped rhythmically against the granite steps of the stairwell leading to the building's courtyard. She paused, then headed for the University Bookstore to pick up a pad of paper, kneaded erasers and pencils for some, hopefully, soothing sketching exercises. She sat on a stone bench in a cloistered courtyard, surrounded by trees. Sitting nearby was an elderly man holding a cane. Despite his age he still had strong-looking shoulders, which struck a familiar chord in Angela. She turned to the first page, immediately losing herself in portraiture. Time slipped away as she drew one after another, shadows deepening, at times obscuring the page. Preoccupied with her work, she simply changed position, intent on the page. Finally she looked up from a detailed rendering of a face. Her subject had left long before she had started this one. In any case, it wasn't <u>his</u> face which stared mockingly from the flat surface. Biting her lip, she made a quick decision and tucked the sketchbook under her arm. She rose to her feet and scuttled across campus, fumbling in her jacket pocket for her car keys. In her haste, she left behind the pencils, eraser, and her purse. Back at the bench, a figure in black picked up her purse, stuffing the small art supplies inside.

Once in her apartment, Angela showered quickly and plopped, wet, in front of her vanity table. She picked up a mascara with trembling fingers. She took a deep breath and spoke to her reflection.

"Get a grip. It's been a month. What's the hurry now?" She steadied her right arm with her left hand to apply the mascara. "He probably won't even be there."

Oh, but I shall. She thought she heard the whisper inside her head, causing her to jump and smear the black eye makeup in her cheek.

"Damn," she swore. She threw down the wand to tissue off the mess. At that moment her doorbell rang. "It just keeps getting better and better," she exclaimed in frustration, drawing on a purple silk kimono.

"Who is it?" she called before looking through the peephole.

"I'm returning your purse. You left it at the University," a man with shaggy blond hair explained.

"I hate to sound paranoid and everything, but can you show me some ID?" she asked, embarrassed. A woman couldn't be too careful these days.

"Certainly," the man agreed, and held up a detective's shield.

Angela exhaled in relief and threw open the deadbolts. She smiled invitingly at the man. "Come on in, officer." She removed her jacket from the back of the sofa. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, but no. I can see you are getting ready to go out." He reached inside his coat. Here's your purse."

Angela took it and put it on the coffee table. "Would you like a glass of water?" She rushed off before he could reply.

"Really, this isn't necessary," he called from the other room.

She came back with two glasses. One was full of something rich and red, the other clear. Handing him the clear glass, Angela sat down on the sofa and sipped the other. Her eyes met his. "Cabernet," she explained. "You didn't want one, did you? I just figured ..."

Nick smiled. "Water is just fine. Actually, I should be going." He moved forward to take her hand. As Angela leaned in to grasp it, her robe fell open, exposing an expanse of creamy thigh. She blushed and pulled it shut, practically leaping to her feet as she did so. Mind a blank, she searched for something to say.

"So, since you found my apartment, I assume you know my name from reading my license." She tilted her head. "So what is yours?"

"Nick Knight. I work in Metro Homicide," he said with a slight tilt to his lips.

"A detective?"

He nodded.

"Well, that must be interesting," she commented in genuine fascination.

"It can be at times. At other times, well, there's paperwork." They both laughed in mutual commiseration as Nick turned to leave. He paused at the door.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Espere." He held out his hand. Angela took it in a soft warm grasp.

"Believe me, officer, ah, Detective, the pleasure is all mine." As she pulled her hand back something fell, unnoticed, to the floor. She shut the door with a sigh, returning to her bedroom.

Dressing quickly, she threw on a trapeze-styled russet velvet dress. Her options had expanded greatly after an extensive, and expensive, shopping expedition. The garment was short and barely covered the thigh-high stockings she pulled on which had a pretty lacy band at the top. She twirled around, revealing flirty glimpses of them. She stepped into heels which matched the dress.

Her last stop was in front of the mirror to apply deep red lipstick. She looked warm and glowing, vibrant with life in the autumn-colored dress and heels, crowned with a head of straight copper hair.

Angela picked up a tiny purse and packed it with small necessities, including some foil-wrapped condoms. Okay, so maybe she was horny. That didn't mean she had to be stupid.

"Be there, be there," she breathed, and shook the tension out of her hands.

Marie operated under similar impulses. Her evening with Nick had been enjoyable, but left certain other needs unfulfilled. Maybe a trip to her favorite vampire haunt was just what she needed.

Angela almost turned back a couple of times, then would chastise herself for being a coward. Inside, the music pulsed around her, loud and seductive. She settled into a corner booth and drinks immediately began to arrive. She sipped on them, and danced with anyone who asked. She was feeling rather weightless when he finally showed up.

Angela steadfastly refused to glance his way. When her companion stopped dancing, she knew he stood behind her. She drew a ragged breath and turned to face him.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming back." His face was set in a welcoming, innocent expression.

"As I recall, you sent me away," Angela countered, feigning disinterest. Her eyes betrayed her, and deepened to a forest green.

He looked over her shoulder. "We look kind of strange just standing here." He held out a hand. Angela took it and stepped into it without hesitation. Somehow he was frightening, and yet she felt safer than she ever had in her entire life. His hands in hers felt right, as were the movements of his body against her own. She gazed up into cool ocean depths.

"I'm Angela." The smile on his face at her words took her breath away.

"I am very glad to finally know your name, Angela. After you left the last time I didn't know how to ask for you, since you just bolted out of here."

Angela's expression indicated he should go on. He cocked his head and pretended not to understand. She lightly exerted pressure on his toes with the tip of one high-heeled shoe.

"Oh, how rude of me," he softly exclaimed. "My name is LaCroix." He led her back to the table and ordered a glass of house wine from a passing waitress with a secretive smile.

Angela spoke. "You know, I was quite irritated with you for a while, but then I decided, why should you spoil my fun? I like the Raven. It's so different from what I'm used to."

His eyes flickered momentarily. She had to bite her lower lip to keep from smiling; her merriment faded when she felt his fingertips lightly stroke her palm. He trailed them up the curve of her arm and around the nape of her neck. Angela's reaction was as immediate as before. This time, however, he would have to say the

words. His eyes told her that was fair. He put his thumb in her mouth. Her lips closed around it, and her eyes drifted shut in desire.

"Come be alone with me, Angela." His voice was a husky whisper, as if he knew what she liked: soft words, light touches, unspoken promises.

Maybe, she reflected, *he did, at that*. "Yes," she said. Her throat felt barely capable of even forming that single word.

He led her from the club, then allowed her to make her way to her car. For obvious reasons, at least to anyone who really knew him, he hadn't brought a car of his own. They drove in silence to Angela's apartment. Once inside, she switched on one light and disappeared into the kitchen. "Would you like some wine?" she called.

"Yes," he answered. "Red."

She poured him a glass of cabernet, which he pretended to sip, then set aside on the table which was littered with the glasses from earlier in the evening. He reached for her. She went into his arms swiftly, tired of the games and of holding back all the passion she felt for him. They kissed like teenagers, long and soulfully. When Angela raised her head, he breathed just as heavily as she, his eyelids half shut, concealing what lay within.

"I want you," she declared in a shaking voice. She pressed his hand to her breast. "Please touch me." Her head fell back as she felt his fingers move across her flesh.

"How much do you want me?" he rasped.

"More than you could ever know." She reached up to pull him back down to her. He tugged away with a look that was wild and feral.

"Will you give yourself completely over to me?" His voice was wily, cryptic.

Angela paused and looked up at the man who held her so firmly. "Will you stop when I ask?"

"Ah, but then it's not a gift. Merely a loan." He threaded his fingers through her hair to draw her back to him. Her hands came between them. He stopped and looked at her askance. "Why do you want me so much?"

"Better to ask me why wouldn't I." He took her hands between his own and lowered his head to press kisses on the tender flesh of her palms. The gentle touch seduced Angela more than the most flowery of words. "Will you promise to treat me like the rarest of the rare?"

LaCroix's brows rose. "The rarest? You are a romantic soul, aren't you, Angela?"

Her cheeks pinkened. She strove to break free of him, but he held her fast.

"I did not mean to imply that was a bad thing."

She snuggled back into his arms. "Then I will give myself to you, for whatever it's worth. For as long as you like." She felt an inner twinge. Was she really that needy? No, she wasn't. She made to pull away again. His arms still held her tightly. "LaCroix, please forget it. I wasn't talking like a sane rational human being."

"In a moment, you won't want to." His eyes began to glow with an eerie, unworldly fire.

Angela screamed, struggling futilely against the arms that encircled her like steel.

"Stop. Don't make me angry, because then I won't be able to control it at all," he warned.

"Control what? You're going to kill me, aren't you?" she gasped.

LaCroix opened his mouth to speak, but closed it when he spied a rectangle of paper on the carpet. With Angela grasped firmly within one arm, he reached down and picked it up.

It read: **Nicholas Knight**
Detective
Homicide Division
Metropolitan Police

There was also a phone number which LaCroix knew by heart. Cursing inwardly he let Angela go.

She immediately saw the change in him. Curious, perhaps a little foolish, she came back to see what he held in his fingers.

"I see the police inspire fear in even such as you," she said, shocked and a little surprised.

His voice was as derisive as the look on his face. "I fear no one."

"But ..." Angela indicated the card with a gesture.

"Ah, Nicholas. Someone to whom I owe so much. Fortunately for you, one of the debts I owe him is also a promise. Something I do not break lightly." A gleam lit up his eyes. "Angela, do you want to live forever, have powers you've only dreamed about? Hold the lives of others in the palm of your hand? This is a gift I'm offering you, but one which you cannot return."

"Do I have to make this choice tonight?" she asked, trying to buy time.

"Don't be stupid," he snorted.

Her eyes glowed with a fire all their own. "Do <u>not</u> call me stupid. I'm just confused."

"What's to decide? If you choose mortality you will die, not now but someday. For me it will seem as if I blinked my eye and you were there, another blink and you are sleeping in a cold, still grave. I offer you so much more than that, an eternity of nights to live whatever way you want, take whatever. It's all up to you what you do with it" His tone was impassioned. He truly believed there was no other way than <u>his</u>.

"No," she said. "I choose no."

LaCroix blinked in genuine surprise. "May I ask why?"

Her face was full of pity. "You are a vampire, which proves there is a soul. As a leap of faith I also assume there is a God. To live as you do would damn my soul, turn His face from me forever. The gift you offer is death. I don't want to die and

yet live, a parasite, for eternity." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I wish I could be with you, somehow, despite what I know you to be. I want that more than anything."

She turned from him. "Please go." She felt fingers turn her chin. Her lashes parted to gaze into golden fire.

LaCroix made good his promise. He hypnotized the young woman to forget knowledge of his true nature. He couldn't resist planting memories of a torrid tryst with him. A satisfied smile crossed his lips as he settled her on the sofa. He kissed her lingeringly on the mouth one last time and left through the window.

Her eyes opened.

Marie entered the Raven in time to watch him romance his latest victim. Janette was displeased. Open displays by one such as LaCroix don't tend to go unnoticed; for her own sake, she hoped the girl all the luck she could muster. As for Marie, she was the teeniest bit insulted. Since when did one romance a late night snack? If he wanted to dance ... She sat, foot tapping, deciding what she should do. In the end, LaCroix decided for her by leading his trampy little friend from the pub.

"Cherie, I do believe there is smoke coming from your ears," the voice of Janette drawled mockingly.

"I feel downright combustible," she gritted out between teeth that were threatening to powder beneath the force of her jaws.

"Do not take it personally. It is a game to him." She pursed her lips. "Don't you think this all gets boring after a while?"

"Please don't tell me that," Marie pleaded falsely. "If I'm going to have an eternity of being bored, point me in the direction of the sun now."

The pub doors opened, allowing a familiar patron to step inside. Both Marie and Janette perked up with interest.

"I do believe I see the sunrise now, cherie," Janette murmured in pleasure.

"Oh, no, you don't. I get him," Marie challenged.

Sputtering in protest, Janette said, "But you got him last time, and the time before that if I recall."

"Down, Janette. You've got a bar to run." Logic like that was difficult to dispute. However, Janette tried one last time.

"Bah, responsibilities. I will take the night off." Nearby came the sound of breaking glasses. She gritted her teeth. "That's what I get for hiring mortals." She stalked to where a young man was trying valiantly to pile a mountain of broken glass onto a tray. Nick approached Marie at the bar.

"Marie, once again I have the pleasure," he greeted warmly.

"Not yet, but we can work on it." Her tone was arch and teasing.

With a chuckle, Nick ordered the house specialty. He turned back to her with a question. "What brings you here tonight, Marie?"

"What else? The chance to see your sunny smile. Isn't that reason enough?"

"Marie, you have spent way too much time in LaCroix's company. You're beginning to sound like him." He took a sip of the thick liquid the bartender brought him.

"Not a chance of that, Nicky. He just left here with a redhead." Her voice betrayed none of the emotion simmering in check. Nick sighed and took her hand, which she allowed. Like a kettle taken from the fire, her mood changed. Her eyes, as they gazed into his, held Nick spellbound.

"Let's go explore the night," she suggested.

"I've already eaten."

"So have I," she said, moving in closer until he could smell her perfume. "When was the last time you took a look at the city from the top of the Tower?" To her consternation, her invitation invoked an expression of sadness from Nick. "What did I say?"

He shrugged. "Last time I was up there, well ... It's hard to talk about." He buffed her hand lightly between his.

Marie tried to lighten the mood. "How about the top of the Sky Dome?" Her brows rose as Nick put on an expression of resolution.

"No, let's go to the top of the CN Tower."

A patron at the bar turned to him. "Sorry, buddy, the Tower's closed for the evening; too late." He looked like a tourist.

Nick turned a warning expression to Janette, who had returned from the kitchen with the young waiter, who looked as lively as a whipped puppy. "What now?" she asked impolitely.

Nick leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "Our friend here, I would be displeased if I had to visit Natalie on his behalf tonight."

Janette nodded. "As you wish, but like I've said before, I'm not a baby-sitter. Don't make this a habit." She settled herself on the barstool next to the man, who decided he must have died and gone to heaven.

Outside, Nick and Marie took to the night air. It swirled around them, cool and crisp. Lights from the city below dazzled their eyes. Above them stretched the darkness, endless, illuminated only by the tiny pinpoints of stars and a glowing crescent moon. They alighted atop the CN Tower.

Marie stood motionless, awed by the spectacle of the city spread out below them. "We fool ourselves into thinking we are so damn important, vampires who can live as long as time can continue to unfold. But, here we are, tiny little specks on the horizon. If I die, or you do, they will make another to take our place. Who is even to say we would be missed?" Her voice was low and earnest.

"If you were gone, I would miss you. LaCroix can make as many companions as he chooses, but you will always touch a place in him he won't admit to. He doesn't understand the fragility of these friendships he creates." Nick sat on the edge of the railing to watch the headlights of the cars driving through the mostly deserted city streets. "Nor do I believe he ever will."

Marie jumped on top of the railing. "Did we come here to talk about Old Sour Puss, or to have fun? I dare you to do a back flip off the rail."

Nick snorted in mock derision. "That's no challenge to someone who can fly."

"Ah, but what if I stipulate that you have to count to ten out loud before you can break into a swoop?"

"Let's make it even better," Nick said, warming to the challenge. "We have to keep our eyes closed."

Marie linked pinkies with him. "You're on. Get up here." She hauled him up beside her.

"On your mark," he called out.

"Go!" Marie shouted and did a back flip in place. She turned to watch Nick sailing through the air in an elegant arc, counting to ten out loud, then opening his eyes as he soared up to the top of the tower again. Marie laughed in uncontrolled guffaws.

"Oh, you are so dead," he admonished.

"Speak for yourself, Knight, I've never felt so alive!" She playfully wrestled him to the ground. "How would you like a victory kiss?"

His lower lip stuck out in a mock pout. "Will that assuage my wounded ego?"

"Be a man. Tough it out."

"I'll give you tough." He neatly flipped her over and claimed his prize. He lifted his head to press soft wet kisses along the curve of her neck and between her breasts. Beneath a long black duster she wore a batiste bodice that laced down the front. He undid the top knot and loosened the ribbons which held it together. Marie placed a hand over his to still them.

"I know I've been adventuresome in the past, but don't you think it's the teeniest bit nippy up here?" she asked in half apology.

"Trust me, Marie." His face was buried against her neck, and his mouth felt hot and steamy. "There are other ways for vampires to play." He demonstrated his intent by sinking his sharp fangs into her tender flesh. Her body arched beneath him. She grabbed helplessly at his coat lapels while her world spun out of control. All that she was flooded into him, overpowering his senses until he felt only the need to feed. He felt her ecstasy drawn out as she started to slip away from him.

The only things Marie was aware of were darkness and the power of Nick's hunger. Suddenly, light exploded behind her eyes. She was being called by innumerable voices. She tried to reach out for them, but was held back. Just as quickly, the light was gone, supplanted by the hazy red vision of Nick bending over her. Something was pressed to her lips, through which his blood coursed down her throat. Slowly she became aware of herself. He put an arm around her and helped her sit up. Marie looked at the arm that encircled her; his wrist was bloody and raw from where he has torn it open to sustain her.

He wore a look of profound embarrassment and regret. "Marie, please forgive me. I don't know what came over me."

Marie held a hand to her head. "Nick, forget it. This is what happens when you let yourself get half-starved. You need to feed more." She sighed. "Is any cure worth losing your control?"

He wordlessly pulled her into his arms and leaped into the air. Soon, Marie was home.

LaCroix was waiting there for her. His mood was not pleasant. "Where the hell have you been?"

Marie stood unsteadily, but her grasp on Nick was like steel. He lent her his strength as they faced down the angry vampire.

"Did we have an appointment here?" Marie mocked weakly.

LaCroix's scrutiny narrowed. "What has happened here?" he demanded. Nick and Marie looked at each other and remained silent. Comprehension dawned. He was, amazingly enough, amused. "Did the beast roar tonight, Nicholas?"

"Like a banshee," he admitted ruefully.

"Go home. I'll take care of Marie." LaCroix strode to where she stood limply, and slung her over his shoulder. Nick was hesitant. Losing patience, LaCroix sniped at him, "Get yourself a hot meal. I imagine Natalie would be happy to comply."

"I am not going to deal with this right now," Nick said. "Take care of Marie." He went back out into the night and left the way he came.

LaCroix swatted Marie on the behind and took her to the bedroom. He settled her on the bed like an invalid, piling pillows to lean her against and drawing a quilt up over her legs.

Marie looked up at him, her gaze serious. "Why are you here, LaCroix?"

He gave her a look of wounded innocence. "To see you, of course."

"I was at the Raven. Things not work out as you planned?"

Sighing, he nodded affirmatively.

"So you decided to console yourself with me. I just wasn't here." She grinned wickedly. "Good," she added.

"Good?" His voice was incredulous.

"You heard me. <u>You</u> come and go as you please. I decided it was time I did the same."

LaCroix contemplated her. "You're right," he finally agreed. "I didn't bring you across as some kind of slave. You have the right to go as you please, just as I have the right to insist on your complete loyalty."

"You know you have that. When was that ever in dispute?" Marie exclaimed.

"Never, nor shall it ever." Her hands were laying limply on the quilt, and he took hold of one. "You are still very weak, and I can't feed you chicken soup." He brought the hand to his lips. "Will I do, instead?"

Marie's breathing quickened just looking at him, and desire brought out her fangs. He stretched out his neck in a gesture of seeming submission. She new better. Marie touched its skin, feeling the blood thrumming under her fingertips. Slowly she brought trembling lips into contact with the soft skin and, quick as lightning, buried her fangs. He tensed, muscles tightening involuntarily. It was

heady, having this temporary power in her hands. His taste was ambrosia, filling her with renewed strength. She drank her fill and a little more. Her intention was to return the favor. Pulling away to stand before her, LaCroix slipped the buttons of his shirt through the loops and discarded it. The same went for the rest of the clothes which covered him.

With a smile, Marie tore at the ribbons of her bodice and tossed it aside. She held her arms out for him. He pulled her close to nuzzle her neck. With a gasp, she submitted. Chuckling, he sat her on the side of the bed to tug off her leather boots and then her slacks. His brows rose when he saw the silky thong she wore. He decided to leave it alone.

"Get on your knees," he commanded her.

She complied swiftly. Startled, she tried to follow when he knelt behind her.

"Stay there."

She stilled and waited. His arms drew her to his chest so that her derriere was seated on his lap. His hands covered her breasts, kneading them softly. Marie moaned low and satisfied as he made an intimate connection. They moved slowly, in time with one another. She arched her neck to the side to give him access. He bit her, growling in exultance as he tasted both Marie and Nicholas on his tongue. If he hadn't already been concerned about her strength, he would have made his drink deep and slaking. As it was, he had to slow down. To buy himself time, he held out his wrist to her. She accepted it, tearing into it hungrily. They rode a crest together while LaCroix flooded himself in two ways into Marie. They hugged, joined together still. He gathered her into the safety of his arms once more to place her on the bed.

"Sleep," he said, his voice soft.

"Only if you will, too."

He complied with a smile. They lay spooned together similar to their previous position on the floor. Sleep came upon them swiftly.

It was a long time before Angela felt safe enough to move. She rose from the sofa, keeping a cautious eye on the open window. She sat in front of her vanity mirror, head in hands, eyes full of tears. Fear shook her still but, to her eternal shame, the fear was of the choice she had been so close to making. Might even still, if LaCroix ever came back. Last night's words had been proud and arrogant, thinly masking the total capitulation she'd been a hair's breadth away from giving.

Please, she thought, *please don't let him be toying with me. If he knew his suggestions had failed ...*

Marie woke alone at dusk. Sighing, she made her way alone to the shower. So LaCroix had disappeared. So what else was new?

⌘ ⌘ ⌘

The next week Angela attended an Art Opening. It was a solo show at the University Gallery for one of the graduate students. The cheese was hard and the wine was watered down. She circulated on autopilot with the other faculty members. Years of experience had taught her all the appropriate lines. The artist was one of the kind who relied heavily on symbolism. With half an ear, Angela listened while he explained what impressions should be properly conveyed by his efforts. Striving mightily to contain the yawn threatening to overtake her, she looked over his shoulder. The yawn did as she spotted a familiar-looking profile.

God, not again, she worried. *If he knew how he had failed to bend my will to his, there would be nowhere to hide.* She breathed slowly and evenly, trying to hold down the gorge rising in her throat. His head turned completely in her direction, and sudden relief encompassed her. It wasn't him. Their eyes locked. Angela looked away first in her confusion. A few strides later and he was standing in front of her.

"Should I know you?" the man asked, a slight tilt to his head.

"Pardon?" Angela asked stupidly.

"Just now, you were staring at me. It looked like in recognition." He shook his head. "Perhaps I was wrong."

"Actually," the corners of Angela's mouth lifted upwards to soften her next words, "I thought you were someone I didn't really want to see."

"Ouch. And now?"

"Well, obviously you're not him." She chuckled and held out her right hand. "Angela Espere," she introduced herself.

He took her hand, exerting a brief gentle pressure. "Stephen Gray." He released her hand. "Would you like another glass of wine?"

Angela grimaced. "Please, no, that stuff's giving me a headache as it is." She sighed regretfully. "Actually, I was about to leave."

"May I walk you to your car?" he offered.

"I would like that."

He retrieved their coats and slid hers across her shoulders. They walked to her car in silence. Stephen held his hand out for her keys.

"You're kidding," Angela said in disbelief. "I thought you were just walking me to my car."

"I think maybe you should let me drive you home, considering the headache I can see is starting to bother you."

All of a sudden, the headache did start to affect Angela. She held a hand to her forehead in an attempt to ward it off. Sparks of light began to sparkle behind her eyes, an ominous warning of the migraine which would obscure her vision.

"Damn," Angela protested weakly. "I hate it when this happens." Gratefully, she accepted the arm Gray placed around her shoulders as he helped her into the passenger seat. In a trembling voice she gave him directions to her apartment. Parking in her usual spot, he came around to her side and carried her out and into the apartment building. Inside her apartment, he found her bedroom and put her on the bed. Angela felt something wet and warm cover her eyes. A washcloth.

"I'm going to leave now. Just keep the cloth over your face. It'll help." He kissed the top of her head and left. Angela lay still on the bed, miserable but touched by his thoughtfulness.

He called the next night to invite her to dinner. They began to spend a lot of time together. He took her to one fine, exclusive restaurant after another. Stephen didn't eat much, claiming that Angela's beauty was much too distracting.

One night, weary of the pace and of having to always dress to the nines, Angela decided that she would plan an intimate dinner at home. She greeted him at the door dressed in jeans and a soft blue sweater.

Stephen looked at his watch in consternation. "We did agree on 8:00, correct?"

"Yes." Angela grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. "But don't you think we could spend the evening in, tonight? I'd like to spend some time alone with you." She pursed her lips. "Besides, I hate to see you spend money on food you don't even eat." She helped him off with his coat.

They walked over to the sofa where several weeks ago Angela had almost made a fatal error with LaCroix. Thoughts of him caused fleeting shadows to cross her face. She plastered on a big smile to cover up her momentary distress. If Stephen noticed anything, he said nothing. Truthfully, he still looked taken aback at the change in the evening's plans.

Angela disappeared into the kitchen to bring out a tray bearing the takeout meal she had ordered. She dished out small portions in deference to Stephen's seemingly permanent lack of appetite. Angela was distressed. The camaraderie of previous nights was missing tonight. An interminable hour passed in which she became increasingly angry.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" she demanded. "You can't relinquish total control for one evening? Why do we always have to follow your plans?" Angela slammed the remains of the meal onto the tray and rose to take it into the kitchen. Stephen jumped up and grabbed her elbow to stop her. The contents of the tray slid onto Angela's white sheepskin rug.

"Oh, that's just fucking great, Stephen! I tell you, you're really trying my patience tonight. I'm not sure how we got along before, but ..." She stopped in mid-rant when she glanced up and happened to surprise a look on his face she never thought she'd find there.

His eyes glowed fiery red, his lips curled back over a toothy sneer. She screamed and tried to run away, but with lightning speed he pinned her against the wall. His lips were cruelly twisted, his expression full of contempt.

"You're not so full of hot air now, are you?" He licked the side of her neck, and her shoulders rose in a gesture of revulsion. "You should have let him take you. I'm a somewhat more demanding master." With no further warning, he tore into her throat, draining her almost to the point of death. As she slipped past the edge of oblivion he gave her q small taste of himself. Angela's mind screamed in utter despair as her soul was ripped from the light which beckoned and back into the inky darkness, her destiny stolen within the space of a few crucial seconds. She

fought her rise back to consciousness, knowing deep within that she was waking to a living eternal Hell. She felt her cheeks being slapped, none too gently. Her hands rose up to shield her face.

"Wake up, Angela," a rough voice demanded. "Face your new life. You have no other choice."

Her eyes fluttered open, filling with scarlet tears at the sight of Stephen Gray poised over her, a sardonic smile on his lips. Sudden lancing pain stabbed through her belly, veins and head.

"Ahhh, I hurt. I'm starved," she gasped. "Help!"

Stephen pulled her up and bade her to close her eyes. He walked her to a table and pushed her head down to something warm and salty.

"Keep your eyes shut," he warned harshly. Then, more kindly, he said, "Feed."

Angela felt a strange thrumming under the surface of whatever it was her lips were pressed to. It called to her. Instinctively her mouth opened, and piercing pain lanced through her cheeks as her canines grew longer and longer. Like twin needles, they punctured directly where the thrumming was loudest. Like mother's milk, something flowed warm and comforting into her stomach. Too soon the flow ceased. By this time, Angela was sated, the clawing pain replaced with sleepy satisfaction.

"Open your eyes," Stephen instructed.

With a smile, Angela opened them and looked down at the source of her pleasure. Horrified screams burst from her, over and over, as she stared at the peaceful face of a small girl, about five or six years of age. Something inside snapped and, as fast as she comprehended her new nature, numbness set in, more effectively turning her into Stephen Gray's slave than the most carefully constructed blood-bonding could have done.

While Angela spent her final weeks in the company of her killer, Marie began to enjoy regular visits from LaCroix. He had come back the night after they had made love.

Marie was, to say the least, pleased. He found her in the garden pruning her roses for the upcoming cold dead months. Pricking her finger on a thorn, she smiled a soft smile of remembrance as she placed the bloody digit in her mouth and sucked.

"Pleasant memories?" LaCroix was suddenly in front of her, an uncustomary easy grin gracing his features.

Marie dusted off her hands and rose to her feet. "Lucien! Twice in one week. I'm speechless," she teased, stepping into the sphere of his personal space.

LaCroix lifted a hand to cup her cheek gently. "I was under the impression that I might be welcome."

Marie sighed, then reached up to pull him into a short intense kiss. "You were right," she whispered.

"Sometimes I'm not sure of your reception," he admitted, "but after last night, I thought things might have changed. It was different than before." His eyes searched her face for confirmation.

"More relaxed," Marie agreed. "I don't know why we always argued so much before."

"Growing pains, perhaps," LaCroix suggested.

"Yes, that's it, growing pains." Her expression grew ironic. "For us both." She turned to him and offered her hands, palms up. LaCroix clasped them gently. "Let's agree to put our past problems behind us." Her tone was serious. "Tonight is a new night. All right?" She posed the offer hopefully.

LaCroix brought her hands up to his heart. "Agreed."

To the outside world, Angela Espere simply vanished one day. Stephen took her all over Canada and the nearby United States. In a blur, Angela took her victims, young and old alike. She never felt any of the pleasure of being a vampire. It was simple: she hungered, she fed. The question never crossed her mind as to what Stephen got from bringing her across. He asked nothing of her sexually, he didn't even require her to hunt. All the food was provided to her by him.

Occasionally, in one of her short lucid states, she would find him watching her. In fear, her mind would slam shut to block out any awareness of him.

One night, however, try as she might, Angela couldn't retreat into her mental haven. With a sinking sense of reality, she realized it was time to come back to herself. He was there, with words to deflect her hatred from him to the one for whom all these plans had been so painstakingly prepared. Soon enough, it would be time for the revenge for which Stephen Gray worked, and Etienne Graves coveted with a passion.

Time of Loss

I fear I am losing you
every time we say good-bye
I am pulled in so many directions
pain meets me each way
Confusion mounts
and I cry
Alone once again
and yet for the first time
Darkness consumes my soul
because I cannot feel you
Rescue me
again
Hold me
and don't let me go
Infinite time
slips away
We have
only seconds
Tick
it's almost
Tock
gone.

Come All Ye ...

Mistletoe hung in the entryway. Boughs of evergreen were tacked up along the tops of all the windows, and Marie Delacroix hummed a generic holiday tune as she placed the last ornament on the tree. Plates of sugar cookies graced her coffee table. Crossing over didn't mean that all aspects of her life had to be in darkness. She still preferred Christmas to Halloween, except that certain songs tended to make her the least bit uncomfortable. But, as long as she avoided songs like 'O, Come All Ye Faithful' or 'Amazing Grace', she was fine. She could forget, for the moment, that she was a vampire and such things were forever lost to her.

Without looking up she knew when he entered the room. A small smile stretched across her lips and she increased the volume of the song she was humming. His arms snaked around her waist. Lips close to her neck, he spoke.

"Marie."

Her body shuddering all over, Marie quieted and rested her back against his chest. She pulled his hand up and turned it to place a soft kiss on his cool flesh.

"Don't you think this is just the least bit perverse?" he murmured.

"LaCroix, you shouldn't say such nasty things about yourself," she mocked.

His chest shaking in silent laughter, he reworded his comment. "No, really, Marie, don't you think it's beyond strange, a vampire putting up a Christmas tree?"

"Oh, that," she dismissed. "It's simply another pretty bauble. You know how I like shiny things." She pulled out of his arms and picked up a plate of cookies. "Want one? I baked them myself." Marie crumbled one in her fingers. "Of course, I couldn't test the recipe for myself, but they look pretty, don't you think?"

LaCroix's expression sobered. "What is this all about, Marie? Are you trying to torture yourself? Otherwise, I'm not getting it."

Marie put down the cookies and dusted off her fingers. "It's the Holiday Blues, LaCroix. Didn't you know that more suicide attempts occur during the months of December and January? I'm feeling a little morose. Something I'm sure you're well familiar with."

"Morose, me?" He chuckled. "In any case, suicidal people don't usually hum happy Christmas songs, bake cookies, and decorate with boughs of holly," he pointed out.

"True, but we're not exactly people now, are we?" she said, pensively flicking at a glass ball. It shattered with a tinkling sound.

"All right, Marie, I think it's time you got out of here," he said in a firm tone. "I've been asking around and it seems you haven't been out of the house in weeks."

"That's not true," she protested. "I left the house to get this tree and these ornaments."

"You're turning into a couch potato. Is that how you want to spend your eternity, drinking blood and watching Ricki Lake reruns?"

Marie's eyes glowed incandescently. "Do you see any empty blood bags or a blaring television? Piles of magazines in the corner, flies buzzing in the stink? It

looks pretty damn normal in here if I do say so myself!" she roared in fury. "What the hell business is it of yours if I don't spend my time in nightclubs or around that creepy vampire bitch Janette!" Enraged, she flung the plate of cookies against the wall.

LaCroix sighed in supreme patience. "Are you finished, or are you going to indulge in more theatrics?" He pushed her onto a sofa. "You know you've cut yourself off completely. Otherwise you would be aware that, for one thing, Janette is gone. I own the Raven now. But the worst thing, the absolute worst, considering that you're supposed to be his friend, is that Nick's partner Don Schanke has been murdered." He crossed his arms over his chest, like a father chastising his child. "How many times have you gone sniffling to him about wicked old me. It's ironic when you take into account the fuss you made a short time back, begging me not to leave, and you left us all."

"Yes, well, we all make mistakes," she sneered, determined to draw him into a fight.

LaCroix, however, hadn't just fallen off the turnip truck. "This isn't healthy. You need to be around others of your kind." He snapped his fingers. "Maybe you should bring someone across. In any case, stop pitying yourself."

"Oh, now wouldn't that be perfect? Another vampire, flying around Toronto like a bat, just to keep me company." She tried to get up, he pushed her back down. "I don't need anyone." Her voice was flat.

"You're mine, Marie. Haven't you accepted that yet?" He finally snapped, his patience at an end. "You can do as you like, but in the end you answer to me."

Marie allowed his anger to boil over. At last she had the reaction she'd been pushing for. LaCroix could be so predictable. She stifled the grin that threatened to break across her lips ad he hauled her to her feet. He held her in his big hands, too furious to utter a sound. His expression altered as he comprehended her barely contained amusement.

"All right, Marie, what kind of game are you playing? Do not tell me you drew me here deliberately. I should be ... annoyed."

"What? Did I leave any messages around, any pleas for help?" Her tone was innocent, a telling thing in itself. Marie was many things, but not that.

"If you were lonely, you could have simply called Nicholas. I'm sure he would have beaten a path to your door. You could have consoled each other."

At this second mention of Nick, Marie had the grace to look ashamed. She was going to have to make her disappearance up to him. He'd been, among other things, a good friend.

"Are you jealous, LaCroix?"

"Jealous? Don't be absurd," he snorted.

"Why else would you tell me to go to Nick and why you've stayed away again?"

LaCroix set his jaw. "You know where to find me. I'm on the damned radio all the time. Even Schanke found his way to CERK. So, once again I would like to know why you're avoiding everyone?"

Marie looked past him to a framed picture. He followed her gaze, walking over to pick it up.

"And this is ...?" he queried.

"My mother." Marie bent her head. "It's her birthday on Christmas Eve. This'll be the first year I've missed it. We used to have a whole week of parties to celebrate her birthday and the holiday." Her voice shook. "We were very close." She looked up uncertainly at LaCroix, his temper legendary in regards to such humanistic sentimentality. He surprised her, however, by sitting next to her on the sofa and drawing her into his arms. He stroked her hair. "You have a new family now, Marie. Stop chasing rainbows and accept what you are. Maybe you've spent too much time with Nick in the past. He does the angst thing so well."

"Well, we know I haven't seen Nick for quite a while. There's something else," she started tentatively.

LaCroix paused at her tone. "What's that?"

"Etienne Graves." She looked him in the eye. "Are you sure he's dead?"

"As a doornail. Why?"

"I've been thinking about it a little lately. I'm not convinced that he couldn't have escaped."

"You heard the screams as well as I." He was beginning to get irritated. "I would have known if he had lived."

"He was pretty sneaky before, with the murders and everything. Didn't you say he had a daughter?"

He nodded.

"Yes, well, she could have flown off with him; maybe she was only able to get him to safety and was caught by the sun. You know they never found any trace of either."

"We do tend to vaporize when the sun hits us."

Marie shrugged. "I know. It's just that I've had this feeling. A sense that something big is going to happen that will change everything."

"So now you're psychic," he said sarcastically.

"Great, don't take me seriously." She tried to disengage herself from him, but he held her fast. He still doubted, but was forced to hear the reason in her words. It was possible, but if it were true then he, Marie, and everyone he considered his family, were in danger.

He smiled. Danger, he liked.

Angela took a deep breath and pushed open the doors to the Raven. Changes had occurred since she had been gone. It was noisier, more crass. She felt the presence of many vampires mixed with sweet scent of the humanity who bobbed and strutted on the dance floor.

She permitted herself the luxury of a brief remembrance of the time she had been here with LaCroix. His arms had held her with such passion and strength. A lie; all he had brought her was death. Etienne Graves, in the guise of Stephen Gray, would never have touched her if LaCroix had treated him right. But no, LaCroix pleased only himself. Now she was paying the price. It was all his fault.

There he was, standing in front of the bar like a god. He was talking to a lovely woman of their kind with rich brown hair. They appeared to be arguing. The woman slammed an empty glass on the counter top. It shattered, scattering pieces of glass all over LaCroix's pristine white shirt. The woman stalked off and sat at a dark table.

Angela watched her in silent contemplation, holding back until LaCroix gave a snort of disgust and left the bar. Before he actually walked out the door, he paused and looked briefly around the club. His brow furrowed with some consideration. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he reluctantly turned and exited. Angela let out an unconsciously held breath. Could he really have felt her in this packed room? She wrapped trembling hands around her middle. *Courage, Angela,* she thought, *courage.* Tentatively, she approached the woman LaCroix had been talking to, bearing a couple of the Raven's special drinks she'd ordered from the bartender.

"May I sit down?" she asked softly.

Marie's head jerked up in surprise. "Suit yourself. Do I know you?" Marie gazed at the woman standing before her. She seemed vaguely familiar.

"I'm Angela." She put one of the drinks down before Marie, who accepted it warily.

"Not to be weird, but this isn't cow, is it? I can only drink human; anything else can be unpleasant."

Angela mentally stored away this bit of information for her master. It was what she was here for, after all, to find the weaknesses of LaCroix's brood, minus Janette, of course. Angela wished she could disappear along with her, away from the things which were tearing what was left of her conscience and soul to shreds. With a start, she realized that the woman was waiting for an answer.

"No, it isn't cow. You'll be fine. By the way, your name was ...?"

"Marie Delacroix," Marie smiled, finding the fury that LaCroix had so easily manipulated out of her was dissipating. It was a talent of his, infuriating her. They had been back and forth on this for days. Why couldn't he listen? She was certain of it, Graves was alive. He was a danger to them all.

"Men!" she said with vehemence to Angela. "Why do they think they have all the answers?"

Angela was amused despite herself. "What has this man done to piss you off so royally?"

"What hasn't he done? He makes it his life's work." She bit her lip, on the verge of spilling the subject on her mind to this stranger. Something made her hold back, to look at her with narrowed eyes. Who was she, why would she bring a

drink over to a woman she didn't even know? It's not a thing women usually do, unless they were already friends. It was a curious thing. "I don't recall seeing you at the Raven before."

"I've been here once or twice," Angela admitted. She decided not to elaborate.

Marie lifted the glass to her lips and took an experimental sip. There was another advantage to being a vampire, the ability to sense the presence of drugs or poisons. None were present here, not that they could affect her for long. However, a garlic cocktail was too painful to contemplate.

Angela sat in confused silence, uncertain of her next move. She studied Marie in silence. Now that she had made contact with one of LaCroix's brood, what did she do with her? She glanced up quickly when Marie rose to her feet.

"I'm hungry," she announced.

"But, what about your drink?" Angela pointed out.

Marie shrugged her shoulders. "That's just an appetizer. I need something a little fresher." She spied a likely contestant in the opposite corner. His girlfriend had finally developed a backbone and threw her drink in his face. Marie had seen him here tonight and on separate occasions treating the young woman roughly. Anger crossed her features when he followed the girl out of the Raven.

"Want to share?" she said in a low voice to Angela. She slid behind the man, leaving Angela free to follow if she chose.

For several blocks the small chain played a cat and mouse game, dipping in and out of shadows. The man took his opportunity when his prey slipped into a dark alley, intent on a shortcut.

"Julie," he rapped out, menace coating his words. She stopped in her tracks, her body rigid with fear. Fumbling in her purse she pulled out a can of pepper spray.

"Come on, Julie, you know that stuff only gets me <u>really</u> mad," he taunted.

She held the can out from a fully extended arm and pressed the nozzle. It fizzed and sprayed with no force, a mere foot. Whimpering, she dropped the can and ran, stumbling on spike heels. He caught her easily, raising his arm to strike. His hand never connected. Marie yanked it behind him and snapped it like a twig. Screaming, he collapsed on rubbery knees.

"Angela, take care of her," Marie demanded. Angela backed the young woman against a brick wall, using the magic which would mesmerize her, making her forget. Marie bent over her victim, using the same powers on him. She took away his pain, filling his awareness with only her. She hated to be the cause of pain. Even for someone like him. His expression was slack, even when her lips parted to reveal her razor sharp canines. Her hands reached out and pulled him up so Marie could sink her thirsty bite into the soft skin of his neck. His body tightened and stiffened in her arms, completely at her mercy.

The taste was incredible, gushing over her tongue, pooling in her belly. She wanted to shout in exultance at the strength which fled him and flowed into her. Marie forced herself to end the contact with him, so Angela could take her turn.

First she broke his neck, just to be sure he wasn't able to come back to haunt her; someone like him would make a really nasty vampire. She watched as Angela sank her teeth into his wrist. She wasn't certain why, but something about the redheaded woman niggled at the back of her mind. Red? LaCroix had left the club a few months backs with a woman who had flaming red hair. But why would she seek out Marie?

Angela stood up. The blood lent her an attractive warm glow. "We should have dinner again sometime," she suggested with a wicked grin, then turned to take to the night sky.

Marie watched her, a thoughtful look on her face.

"How did it go?" Graves demanded as soon as Angela made her way into the warehouse he had purchased as Stephen Gray. It was deserted, only containing the bed Graves slept in and Angela's sleeping bag. The windows were all painted black and covered with heavy shades. Their clothes hung on exposed pipes.

Angela was sleepy. The sun was coming up soon and all she wanted was to crawl into a place that was cool and dark. She felt sick at heart and in the pit of her stomach. But first she had to deal with Graves, who wasn't about to let her off the hook easily.

"It went well, I think. I met Marie and we went hunting."

"Hunting? You aren't here to have fun," he sneered, knowing full well how Angela felt about killing.

Angela sighed. "Do you call murdering people fun? Anyway, I found out that Marie can only have human blood."

Graves wore a look of satisfaction. "Good work. Is there anything else?"

Angela yawned. Her thoughts were starting to get fuzzy. She shook her head and crawled into her sleeping bag. She barely had the zipper pulled up before she was submerged into a deep sleep. As she drifted off, the voices called out to her, the ones that told her all was not lost. "Go away," she muttered softly.

Graves watched her with exasperation, but knew better than to push. She was likely to simply shut down again. It had achieved his end previously, but would be a total disaster if she once again made the descent into madness. Even now, he didn't think she was all there. At least she had made first contact. Tomorrow, perhaps, she would meet with Knight. With any luck, this would all be finished quickly. He was impatient for his revenge. LaCroix had gotten away with too much for too long.

The next night found Angela standing in front of a shop window. Her reflection revealed a woman full of internal turmoil. She wound her fingers through her hair, striving to compose herself. The things Graves required of her filled her with nausea. Why couldn't they just kill LaCroix and be done with it? Nick Knight had been so nice to her before. Why was it necessary to include him in their plans? She stiffened, there he was, leaving a shop with his female partner. They walked towards her,

conversing easily. Spotting her, Nick paused, footsteps slowing until he stood before her. The blond woman stopped and spun around, claiming she had forgotten something. Nick nodded absently. He smiled and held out his hand to Angela. She took it tentatively, the contact sending shock waves throughout her body. Nick's mouth opened in a silent 'oh'.

"I see there have been some changes since we met last," he commented sadly. It wasn't only that he recognized her as kindred. The light in her had been doused, her eyes which previously had revealed her gentle soul seemed devoid even of color.

"A few changes," Angela admitted. "How have you been?"

"It's been a difficult winter so far. Murder seems to be on the rise for some reason. Same old fun," he said deprecatingly.

"At least it keeps you busy." Angela stuffed her hands in her pocket, lowering her head. She was afraid she was giving away too much of herself. She hadn't sought him out to commiserate on the sorry fact of their vampire existence. It was difficult though, she had sensed it about him immediately.

"Why don't you come over to my loft. My shift is about to end. I just need to drop Tracy off at the Station."

"That would be nice," Angela said hesitantly. They walked together to his car, waiting silently for Tracy Vetter to join them. Moments later, she emerged from the shop and climbed into Nick's Caddy. Nick made the introductions, then pulled the car out to merge with the sparse nighttime traffic. Tracy made a few attempts to engage Angela in conversation, but gave up after Angela answered in brief monosyllabic replies.

A little while later, they entered his loft. Nick tossed his keys onto a table and walked over to the refrigerator. He uncorked a bottle and poured them both a glass of its thick red contents. Angela sipped from hers absently.

"Penny ..." Nick said.

"Hmm?" Angela looked up with a start into his eyes. They were warm and friendly, full of trust. She blinked and looked away, her heart torn with sudden guilt.

"Angela, please tell me what it is that has you so troubled. I remember when I met you before, you were so warm and full of life. Who did this to you? Who brought you over, was it LaCroix?"

"Who?" Angela pretended with innocence.

Nick let out a sigh of relief. Whoever it was, at least her Master wasn't the ancient and powerful vampire. No one else could possibly be as dangerous to deal with. Few vampires could fill his heart with fear like LaCroix, despite their relationship..

He watched as Angela explored his apartment and its few well-chosen furnishings. She paused in front of one of his paintings, a representation of the sun, his favorite subject. A smile lit her features.

"I still remember what it looks like," she reflected softly. "It was an Indian Summer day." She stopped and looked at Nick. "You know, on my last day. Of course I didn't know it was my last day." She pursed her lips. "But something told me to take stock of it. Anyway, I went for a walk and I wore hiking boots and shorts. Shorts in October." She giggled, an uncomfortable sound. "The sun was warm on my shoulders, it felt like a caress." She stopped and stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, uncertain what to say next.

Nick took pity on her and chose something from his video library he hoped would make her laugh. In no time at all, the Marx Brothers appeared on his wide screen TV.

"I wish I could eat popcorn," Angela said wistfully and sat on his sofa. Nick seated himself next to her and took hold of her hand. The quiet action soothed her, causing her to relax and actually enjoy herself. They played all of the funny tapes in his collection, until the unmistakable sound of birds chirping signaled the new day.

Sudden fear overtook Angela; she had been out too long. Graves would be angry. She jumped up and grabbed her coat. Nick was in front of her in a flash.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked with alarm.

"Home. I've got to get home. It's daylight."

"I noticed," Nick commented wryly. She tried to brush past him. He grabbed her shoulders "Listen, you go out there, you fry. You're too young to have built up any tolerance."

Angela tried to release herself, but he held her fast. "You don't understand. I've never been away from home during the day before. It's dangerous. I <u>have</u> to go."

Her voice grew weak and pitiful as Nick gathered her into his arms and stroked her on the back, like a baby. After she had quieted, he pulled back to look at her face. Her eyes were wide and confused.

"I don't want to do it." Her voice was a whisper.

"Do what?" He asked.

She pulled away and curled up on the couch. "I don't want to do it," she repeated almost inaudibly as she fell into a deep, troubled sleep.

Nick didn't know what to think. More and more he was convinced that there was something terribly wrong. Also, whatever was troubling the fledgling had to do with him. He just didn't have a clue what it could be. He decided against trying to wake her, it could wait until she was stronger. He got a blanket and covered her with it, for security. Angela was like a helpless child. He reflected with compassion on the woman he had once met. That woman had been so charming and attractive.

Angela looked the same, and yet not. No joy animated her features. His lips tightened. He would find out the name of her master and get her away from his influence. Even if he had to destroy him. What had been done to her was a crime which couldn't be prosecuted the normal way. He vowed to protect her, to try to restore what she had once been.

He crawled onto the floor next to the couch where she slept. He wanted to be as close to Angela as possible, in case she needed him. Nevertheless, when he awoke, she was gone.

Graves was furious. In a rare mood of defiance, Angela ignored him and settled into her sleeping bag. She waited, breathless for his response. Surprisingly enough, he did nothing. It came to her as a shock, the realization of how necessary she was to his plans, how much he feared another breakdown. Without Angela, none of this was possible. He could not find out the things he needed to know. Nor would he have someone who could enter the places he could not.

Something flared back to life in Angela. The voices in her head whispered encouragement. She dared not think what it might be. One thing was certain, it felt good.

Angela became genuinely good friends with Nick. She told Graves there were no weaknesses to use against the vampire detective. She lied; there were plenty. Number one on the list was Natalie Lambert. Angela knew full well that Nick was in love with her; it was one of the things she chose not to tell Graves, who was becoming impatient.

What good was she, he would yell, if she couldn't come up with a single scrap of useful information?

Angela fudges, saying that Nick had a fear that went beyond normal, even for a vampire. Of course she didn't tell Graves about the paintings in Nick's apartment, or the sunbed in his bedroom.

Of Marie, however, Angela had no compunction about telling her Master what she knew about LaCroix's consort. The violent illness if she consumed any blood other than human. Also the dog; it was a mystery to Angela why LaCroix had allowed Marie to keep the animal. When she asked Nick, he simply shrugged, saying that perhaps LaCroix was beginning to soften in his old age. Or maybe it was his affection for Marie. Who knows? In any case, Marie's fondness for the animal was a definite weakness as far as Angela was concerned. Especially when she discovered that Marie had almost brought it across once.

As for LaCroix, his obsession for his enfants was the only thing which Angela could discern could bring about his downfall. This was not news to Graves, but it did confirm the eventual effectiveness of his plan. Time and again, Angela observed how he would ignore Marie for days, only to show up on her doorstep like an avenging angel. In regards to Nick, if he wasn't calling out to him on the airwaves, he was physically following him around the city. Angela had no way of knowing that although these things were true of LaCroix, his behavior towards them had accelerated due to an overwhelming sense that something just wasn't right. He watched and waited for a sign. He had noticed the friendship Angela forged with Nick and Marie. He didn't think it was any cause for concern.

The sign he was looking for came in mid-December. It was a week before Christmas. He'd just driven up in front of Marie's house in a fast car he had indulged

in purchasing as a mock Christmas present for himself. Sudden screams rang out. It was Marie. In a flash he located her. She was on her knees in front of Minnie. LaCroix knew whatever it was, had to be bad. The dog lay still, her fur wet and matted. She lived still, on the edge of death. He could ascertain a faint heartbeat.

"Let's carry her into the light," he suggested, picking the dog up gently. Under the floodlights, he could that Minnie had many vampire bites all over her body. It was amazing she was still alive, considering the small amount of blood left in her body.

It had been a deliberate act by Angela, who had followed the letter of her Master's orders. He had only said to bite the dog many times and take her blood. He hadn't said she actually had to kill her, so she decided not to. If the beast were to live, it was up to Marie.

Marie knelt beside Minnie opposite LaCroix. Her eyes were filled with grief as she silently beseeched him for understanding.

"Do it, Marie. End this one way or the other."

In an instant Marie made her decision. Like she had before, her fangs sank into the dog's tough skin. This time LaCroix didn't pull them apart. There had been barely enough time to do it, but Marie's efforts were met with success.

The dog's eyes opened, the irises glowing an eerie yellow. Marie sighed in relief. Minnie was safe! LaCroix gave a barely perceptible shake of the head. Marie and her indulgences were going to get her into trouble one of these days.

They took the dog hunting; her prey was larger now and wore antlers. Marie's lips twisted in distaste when LaCroix took his turn first with the deer. He wasn't fond of deer blood, but it was important to let the dog know she was second in the feeding chain, even if she was the one to bring down the victim.

He was more than a little miffed at what he perceived to be stubbornness on the part of Marie. After all, they were invincible vampires. They weren't supposed to have food allergies.

True, Marie pointed out. But what about sunlight, garlic, running water, et cetera? She ticked off each point on a finger. LaCroix ignored Marie and bent to scratch Minnie on the top of the head. She growled and bared her fangs at him. He too growled and repeated the action. Minnie whimpered like a puppy and showed him her belly.

"Now look what you've done. I won't be able to do a thing with her now," Marie teased.

"Don't be ridiculous," LaCroix scoffed. "She has the heart of a wolf."

The dog sat and fixed her intelligent stare on him. Her tongue lolled out between teeth that were too long for a mere dog. Her tail thumped hopefully on the ground.

"Indeed," Marie replied dryly. "Come, Minnie." The vampire dog got up and trotted to her mistress. Settling on her haunches, she waited patiently yet expectantly. "Lets go."

The three leapt into the air. It swirled around them, cold and thin. It was a dark night, the stars shone like beacons in the sky, obscured by not a single cloud. They

spent the evening flying. They scared a group of teenage boys who were camped out in a cemetery. A jumper who stood on the railing of a bridge leapt to safety when they swooped in low, frightening him. For the rest of his life he would tell people about the man, woman and dog who flew in the air like giant birds. No one believed him, he was only the town drunk after all.

Daylight found them racing through Marie's front door.

"Do we ever not come in just in the nick of time?" Marie exclaimed, smoking but full of inner fire.

"Now where would be the fun in that?" LaCroix joked, searching out a good 'vintage' among the bottles in Marie's fridge. They shared his choice as they sat up laughing and talking while the dog slept most of the day.

He left in the early evening, to get the Raven ready to open. Marie picked up several empty bottles and their two glasses in an attempt to tidy the place. She didn't want to leave a mess when she left to meet LaCroix later at the club.

She never left of her own volition. A bag was thrust over her head and tied fast, along with her arms and legs. She was strong, but whoever had her knew how to restrain a vampire. No amount of struggling could free her.

She waited in darkness a long time for someone to free her. In the end, she was to wish the wait had been longer. Her arms were freed by rough hands, only to be tied down straight at her sides to a flat surface. The same treatment was given to her neck and legs. Suddenly the bag was pulled off her head. She didn't recognize the face which leered down at her. A hand covered her mouth, another one pulled her chin down. A third hand, holding something, hovered over her. It seemed to hesitate.

The man spoke to the person Marie couldn't see. He was angry.

"Would you put it in?" he grunted. "She's stronger than she looks."

The other person moved into view. It was Angela. Marie gasped, and at that moment a long hard tube was inserted into her throat. It seemed to go on forever. When it stopped, she knew the end must rest in her belly. She tried to jerk her head to the side, to dislodge it. But they had done too good a job tying her down. Marie's eyes crossed, trying to see what the tube contained. It was colored red. With some relief she realized that at least they weren't going to starve her.

That thought was replaced with sinking horror. She couldn't taste the blood being fed into her body, but her body knew. It wasn't human. Involuntarily, she retched it back up. The blood forced its way past the tube. What didn't make it through the tight space flooded into her lungs. Pain lanced her chest, like a stake through the heart. It went on and on, the cramping in her stomach, the retching. No torture could have been worse. She was convinced that if she wasn't a vampire, she would already be dead.

The man stood where he knew Marie could see him, pleasure crossing his features. In time, he grew bored and left.

Angela watched Marie suffer, her indecision written on her features. The voices chose then to once more try to call her to them. Angela clapped her hands over her

ears. They didn't stop. The whispering was maddening, causing the guilt to resurface. She struggled to regain the numbness that allowed her escape all the pain. It didn't work, there was only one solution. That was to help Marie.

She set her jaw and moved toward Marie, who braced herself for some new atrocity. She was shocked to see Angela pour out the contents of the bucket to which the tube was attached, and even more so when she went away and came back with bags of human blood. She emptied them into the bucket, then took a knife and sliced along the thick artery on her arm. Her blood mingled with the other.

Marie's eyes asked 'why'. Angela shook her head and held a finger to her lips. "Don't make a sound. If he knew I had helped you, there would be no help for any of you, because he would then kill me. Relax for now. Then pretend to be sick when he comes back. He can't know what I did." Angela gathered up the empty bags and left, sick at heart.

The only way she could help anyone was if she killed Graves. She couldn't do that, he was her Maker. It wasn't possible, was it?

LaCroix approached the house with caution. Something was definitely amiss. He could hear Minnie howling in fury. As he neared the front door, he could see that it was ajar. He stepped inside slowly. He hadn't lived as long as he had by being rash. What he found in the house only added to the mystery. Minnie was chained firmly to the staircase, shaking from head to foot. Marie's furniture was thrown all around the room, indicating signs that she'd struggled mightily with whoever had taken her. LaCroix didn't need to look any further, he could feel she was nowhere on the premises. Why anyone would want to kidnap Marie stumped LaCroix. As far as he knew, he pondered as he freed Minnie, she didn't have any enemies in Toronto. The idea that anyone might have discovered her location all the way from Kansas City, was ludicrous. Which left only one conclusion, Marie had been taken because of her association with him. His eyes narrowed as he remembered their recent conversations about Etienne Graves. If she'd been correct, how could he find out?

He went directly to the police station to seek Nick's help. He was breaking a new rule by risking that Tracy saw him talking with Nick somewhere other than at the Raven. In fact, he wasn't sure if Tracy even knew of Nick's long-standing association with the place. It was no concern to him. His only consideration was for Marie and her safety.

Nick took one look at LaCroix and knew there was trouble in store for him tonight or, more likely, for them both. He steered LaCroix immediately out of the station and into his Caddy, narrowly missing the eagle eyes of his new partner.

"What is it?" he asked, dispensing with the polite greetings.

"Marie is missing." LaCroix quickly filled him in on what few details he knew. Nick ran a hand through his hair in a gesture of frustration. He sat for long

silent seconds pondering a course of action. He snapped his fingers and put the car in motion.

"Where are we going?" LaCroix questioned, annoyed at having to ask.

"To find one of the few persons both Marie and I know."

"Angela Espere?" LaCroix guessed with a smirk.

Startled, Nick took his eyes off he road a split second to look at LaCroix. "Don't tell me you know her too?"

"Briefly. Let's just say I made her an offer she decided to refuse," he replied cryptically. "Apparently she must have changed her mind later."

"Or someone changed it for her. As a matter of fact, knowing the state of mind she's been in, I would stake my life on it."

LaCroix winced. "Please don't us that phrase."

Nick grinned. "It's good to see you still have a sense of humor." He turned his head to face LaCroix again. "So how did the two of you meet?"

LaCroix shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. Angela showed up at the Raven one night, early in the Fall, looking for excitement."

Nick's lips twisted in amusement. "And you decided to give her that excitement. Is that it, and she refused you?"

At LaCroix's silence, Nick's attention once again left the road.

"You might want to consider keeping your eyes on the road. An accident could slow us down," LaCroix commented acidly.

Nick's brows shot upwards. "You turned down a free meal?"

"You don't have to make me sound indigent. I'm quite capable of finding my own sustenance without having to have it throw itself onto my fangs." His expression turned wicked. "I didn't the next time."

Nick nodded. "Ah, next time she turned you down. What a blow that must have been to your monumental ego."

"No, I did go home with her, but when I offered to bring her across, she refused. I respected her opinion and let it go at that." He spoke in an offended tone, deliberately leaving out Nick's own role in the scenario.

Shaking his head, Nick conveyed his confusion. "Are you telling me that Angela Espere had three chance meetings with vampires as a mortal? Contrary to popular belief, there aren't that many of us in Toronto. We simply all keep bumping into each other at the Raven. Our only safe haven."

"Nicholas, I'm impressed. You made a rhyme." Filled with inner turmoil over the fate of Marie, LaCroix turned to the familiar, sarcasm.

Nick rolled his eyes. LaCroix could be such an ass.

Shortly after LaCroix had freed her, Minnie started off on her own search for Marie. Her new senses picked up two unfamiliar scents. She also detected, most strongly, the taint of fear mixed with the warm musky trail of her mistress. It didn't concern her in the least that Marie had been carried off by air. She could still

faintly discern her presence from far off. It was barely there, admittedly, but it pulled Minnie towards her, like a beacon.

With a worried howl, Minnie leapt into the air.

Angela nervously tucked the fake hair from her wig behind her ears. It was ridiculous to attempt to hide from vampires this way. Their senses went beyond obvious physical traits. Hopefully when Nick and LaCroix came to the Raven searching for Marie, they would be too obsessed with their own concerns to notice anyone other than the person they came here to find.

Sure enough, when the two men walked through the club's door, their glances were drawn past Angela, who kept her head averted. They stood together and talked briefly before LaCroix spun on his heel aid walked back out the door.

Angela got up, surreptitiously sliding the wig from her head to the floor. Butterflies churning in her stomach she approached Nick. A thousand needles of guilt pricked at Angela when he turned and an expression of relief crossed his features. If it weren't a direct order from her Master, she would refuse to lure Nick into the trap which was sprung the instant she opened her mouth. Like the trusting individual she knew him to be, at least with certain people, he swallowed the bait.

Angela told him she had seen Marie with a tall man who resembled LaCroix. In a near panic, Nick followed Angela out the club. Angela led him to the warehouse Graves was hidden out in, and where Marie was kept captive. She opened the door and they walked in.

Nick gazed at Angela, confused. "You saw them here?" Suspicion flared to life within Nick. "Even if Marie were here, why would you be? This isn't exactly your neck of the woods."

Angela was saved from having to fabricate another lie by the appearance of Etienne Graves. He emerged from the small room where he'd been hiding to join the two on the bottom warehouse floor. He had Marie tucked away on an upper level. He was amused by the sudden fury which overtook Nick.

"Marie said you were alive, but we scoffed at the notion. I won't make the same mistake again." He moved forward to reach for Graves, who merely laughed.

"Try it, Knight. I can guarantee that I at least have not missed any meals. You only survive on cow's blood, your strength is like you've been subsisting on water." He grabbed Nick by the collar and tossed him headlong into the far wall. Nick struggled to his feet, blood in his eyes. Hi threw himself blindly at where he guessed Graves to still be standing, who fended him off like an annoying fly. Angela's master made a gesture, which she immediately obeyed. despite the storm of protests screaming in her head. She retrieved a crossbow, which she had placed nearby earlier for this very moment. Loading it with an ash shaft, she let an arrow fly at Nick. Not expecting it, he did nothing to avoid it. Indeed, with his eyes still obscured by the blood which continued to trickle into them, he wasn't aware of its source. He only knew sudden tearing pain as another slammed into his chest, narrowly missing his heart. He fell to his knees, clutching at the shafts. With a grunt of pain,

he pulled them out, then wiped his eyes. The gash on his forehead healing quickly, blood was no longer a visual hazard. Quickly locating Angela's position, he was aghast to see she was the one holding the crossbow. Involuntarily, he moved in her direction. She loaded another bolt, her expression making her a stranger to him.

"The first two were a warning." The softness and vulnerability left Angela, as if they had never existed. Or had they? There was something there, in the eyes, buried deep. The Angela he knew hadn't been a facade worn to fool him, he only needed to know how to reach her. In the meantime, it wouldn't do to underestimate her again. At her urging he walked to a box. Graves lifted the lid and shoved him inside, then told Nick to remove his clothes.

"Whatever turns you on," Nick muttered, tossing his shirt and pants aside. Nick chuckled, this puny box couldn't possibly hold him for long. It was made out of wood and not reinforced in any way. There was something curious about it, Nick noticed as he was forced onto his knees. It had a lot of tiny little doors with hoop latches.

What could be the possible use for them, he pondered as his hands were securely tied behind his back, as were his ankles. He only saw them for a few seconds before he was pushed unceremoniously onto his back before the lid closed over his head.

He detected much activity around the box as the latches were lifted, one by one and dropped. If this was their method to drive him insane, Nick thought, then they had a lot to learn. Such psychological nonsense wouldn't bother him until he had been submerged in darkness a much longer time. The box was cramped, but he supposed it hadn't been built for comfort.

After a while, the box was set in motion, being hoisted into the air. He felt it rock as he was suspended in mid-air. He felt the passage of hours as he swung in the box, unmolested. Suddenly, he heard a sharp creak as sunlight flooded into a small corner of the box. He hissed, attempting to move his foot, which was smoking from the direct ray of sunlight seeking out his bare skin. One by one, tiny doors opened closed, increasingly faster, until Nick's skin threatened to ignite from the blistering light.

For hours it went on, periods of darkness and relief, followed by a frenzied spate of opening doors until Nick was screaming from the intense pain, uncontrollably.

For Graves, hidden from the sun, yet able to witness all that transpired, it wasn't enough. Nick's reactions weren't as intense as he expected. He needed to send out a message of agony so clear and direct LaCroix could hear it a hundred miles away.

"You did say he feared the sunlight," he stated to Angela.

"As do all vampires," she agreed.

He gritted his teeth. "Yes, but didn't you imply it was worse than normal, an actual phobia?"

"I don't think those are the exact words I used," Angela prevaricated.

Graves hauled Angela up to his face, the front of her dress bunched in his hands.

Angela was immediately sorry for her earlier defiance.

"What else haven't you told me, Angela?" He glared at her, willing a response that, surprisingly enough, she wasn't prepared to give.

The need was strong to obey him, something in the way he had made her made it undeniable. But, it came to Angela that she was not alone in her struggle against him. For even now, the voices in her head raised a cacophony of encouragement. At times she thought she recognized them. The soft voice of her Grandmother who died when she was very little, her natural father who'd given his life to save her from drowning in the river she'd so foolishly attempted to cross on her own. Other voices piped up from time to time, some less recognizable than others. All served as a cheering section, urging her to claim her freedom from Graves and come home to them.

Lips pressed together, she rose as her will strengthened, just a little, but enough to keep her from giving him what he wanted. With an inward sigh, he released her. It wasn't only because he still needed her, he most certainly did. But not merely for the reasons Angela assumed. It was simple. In the same way that he knew LaCroix regarded his own creations, Graves looked on Angela as a daughter.

Graves' eyes narrowed, hatred for LaCroix resurging anew. His poor little girl, who'd died saving him from the sure death that awaited him on the roof of his house. Angela was like her in so many ways. She was sweet, creative, and needy. He reached out a hand and touched her softly on the cheek.

"I'm going to go check on Marie, she should be progressing nicely." He turned to go, his voice firm once again as he gave her a parting order. "Don't do anything foolish."

Foolish, Angela thought, *like perhaps letting Nick out of the box.* She snorted. Sympathetic she might be, but she still had the will to live.

LaCroix was in a near panic. Not only was Marie missing, he couldn't locate Nick. What the hell was going on? If Graves was alive, why couldn't he face him. Why all these games? He heard it then, screams of such suffering, they seemed to come from inside his own head. These wails of agony could mean only one thing, his enfants were dying. With glowing red eyes and deadly purpose, ho followed the psychic thread.

Closer on the trail, Minnie also heard her mistress cry out silently. Howling worriedly she struggled against the burning sunlight, keeping to the shadows.

Blood streamed from Marie's nose. Graves had discovered Angela's ruse. In his fury, he dumped out the bucket of human blood and filled it with undiluted cow's blood. The first meal forced down Marie's throat must have been cut, not pure cow, for the deep pain she now felt was unlike anything she had experienced previously. She wished for a stake through the heart so that it would all just end.

In another part of the cave, Nick was still having his own troubles. The doors still opened and shut, though not with as much speed as before. Angela worked them mechanically, trying to shut her mind off from his screams. They tore through her head as if she were the one who uttered them. They combined with the voices of the others who now spoke to her constantly. Bedeviled, she clapped her hands over her ears, as if that would silence them. In her confusion, she dropped the lines which worked the doors on the box. She came back to herself when she realized that even though she no longer controlled the ropes, Nick's screaming had continued and actually increased. She looked up. Smoke poured out of a stuck door. Gasping in her fear for Nick, she bound into the air and slammed the door shut Just as quickly, she dove for safety. At the far end of the warehouse, Graves watched, menace emanating from him in waves.

"Angela, come here!" he roared.

In her fear, Angela froze, remaining where she cowered, separated from him by the huge expanse of sunlight filling the room.

"Do not make me ask again." His voice grated across her ears like fingers on a chalkboard. Reluctantly, she pulled the hood of her protective robe further over her head and swooped to where he stood, impatient. He grabbed her arms and stripped off her robe.

"Just what did you think you were doing?"

Angela stammered in her fear. "D-doing?"

"You'll be interested to know that I replaced the blood you yourself substituted." He spoke with deadly intensity. "What do you think I should do to punish you?"

Angela's mouth worked futilely, unable to formulate any response which might satisfy him. Unceremoniously, he shoved her into the direct sunlight.

Being just a fledgling, Angela's skin instantly began to blister and smoke. She kept her eyes shut, so the sun wouldn't blind them, and dove for her discarded robe. Throwing it over her head, she found a safe spot, far away from Graves. No amount of shouting or commands from him could budge her. He had, at least temporarily, lost his control over her. Her face full of hatred, Angela sat, unmoving, until the sun went down.

The moment it was no longer risky, she moved toward the box. Graves was there in the same instant. Her hand on the latch, she faced him.

"Nick, can you hear me?" she called out to the captive vampire.

His voice was weak, but reassuring. "Yes, I can. Get me out of here."

Angela flipped the latch open the same instant LaCroix found them. The lid to the box flew open and Nick staggered out, blistered but otherwise unharmed. LaCroix stood at the entrance of the vast warehouse floor where Graves, Angela and Nick were gathered uneasily. Between one heartbeat and another, LaCroix had Graves by the throat. He was not in an accommodating mood.

"How many times am I going to have to kill you before you stay dead?" His fingers tightened around Graves throat, crushing vertebrae. Graves' eyes bulged

in fear and his hands tore at the grip LaCroix had on him. Stupidly, Angela moved to help her master. Taken by surprise, LaCroix let go of Graves. In disbelief he turned to Angela while Graves scrambled to safety.

"It would probably have been better if you hadn't alerted me to your involvement in this sorry mess." He spoke in a tone which was well familiar to Nick. As angry as Nick was at Angela, she at least had let him out of the box, not to mention the torture she'd stopped. He put himself between her and LaCroix.

"Get out of the way, Nicholas," LaCroix said impatiently.

"In case it has escaped your attention, our real enemy has flown the coop." His gaze was steady, willing LaCroix to act with reason, not anger. Sometimes anger could get you killed real fast. Exhaling his impatience, he turned to track Graves down.

"Watch her," he warned as he left.

Angela stood shamefaced before Nick.

"Why?" he asked.

"He was my master, he still is." Scarlet tears welled up in her eyes. "I try to resist him, really I do. But I think he did something to me when he made me a vampire. It's like he replaced my will with his." Her breath caught in sudden sympathy, noting Nick's near-naked state. She drew the robe from around her shoulders to drape over his.

"I'm afraid Etienne had me burn your clothes," she explained apologetically.

Nick shrugged. He had more important things on his mind. "Tell me, Angela, where did he go?"

Angela was in motion before him. In all the confusion she'd forgotten about Marie.

"We've got to get to Marie!" Angela shouted as she leapt for the shortcut leading to her. She arrived to find LaCroix and Graves circling one another like great cats, fangs bared and glistening. LaCroix move first. Fists clenched, he rocketed a sharp jab at Graves' mouth, breaking one of his fangs in two. Blood poured from the blunt stunted tooth. Howling in rage, Graves threw himself at LaCroix and tried to grab him in a headlock. The ancient vampire merely swatted him away, then rethought and took him captive in his own steely embrace. LaCroix bent his head deliberately and sank his extended fangs into Graves' neck. He tore through the layers of skin with no finesse, seeking to cause as much pain as possible while draining Graves of the precious fluid he found there.

Angela cried out in protest. Graves was horrible and had made her do awful things, but he was her master and all she knew. What would happen to her if he should die? What would be her purpose? He'd brought her across for his revenge, and that was all she knew. It was the sole motivation for what she did next. She ripped the tube out of Marie's throat. Blood gushed, splattering her and pooling on the floor. Angela grasped both ends of the tube and wrapped it around LaCroix's throat. She twisted it until it was as tight as a tourniquet. Annoyed, LaCroix lifted his head and attempted to dislodge his neck from the grip Angela had on it. She

held fast in furious strength. Next he simply reaching behind him and flipped her over his head. Angela landed on her back with a dull thud, pain lancing through her back. With some horror, she realized that she'd broken her back. She could move her arms, but not her legs. *It would heal*, she thought silently, *but not before he rends me limb from limb.* Thankfully, that didn't happen, because Graves was back on LaCroix in an instant. Whether to save Angela or simply to continue the fight, she didn't know. In any case, the fight was once again between the two male vampires. Angela looked for Nick. Where had he been in all this?

Nick cradled a feather-light Marie against his chest. He'd arrived when LaCroix had his hands filled with Angela. Marie's bonds had been easy enough to break. Swiftly he carried her to safety. She looked up at him, eyes full of gratitude. More than anything she was glad that the pain had stopped. If she ever even saw a cow again, she would tear it to pieces, she vowed.

Angela followed them, pulling herself along slowly with her hands. Graves would be angry if they got away. Suddenly, she felt her legs again. She got onto her feet unsteadily and took an experimental step. Her feet held beneath her. Thank heaven for small favors.

She spotted Nick and Marie on the warehouse floor. She found her crossbow and called out to them.

"Just where do you think you're going?" She held the bow in unsteady hands, cocked and ready to fire. Nick stopped in his tracks and turned around, disbelief written on his face.

"Angela, don't you think it's time to give it up? Graves is a monster. I know you don't want to hurt us." His voice sounded confident, but inside, he doubted his ability to reason with her. He'd underestimated her before and it had gotten him tied up and tossed into a box. It had taken him all day to release himself from his bonds , only to be faced with the question of how close to safety he was if he broke his way out of the box. As a leap of faith, he tried taking a step toward her. He heard a snick and looked down at the shaft that pierced his chest just below the collarbone. The pain hit. He could do nothing with Marie in his arms. Marie had just enough strength to reach up and pull the arrow out. She threw it away with a clatter.

"You know I'll do it again if you move." Angela winced as blood gushed from the arrow hole. "Please don't make me do it again," she asked plaintively.

"You bitch," Marie gasped hoarsely, "you were our friend."

Angela's expression hardened. She couldn't help the jealousy she felt toward Marie, protected as she was by LaCroix. She snorted; some protection that had turned out to be.

"I was never a friend of yours, Marie. I was just following orders. You're just LaCroix's whore." Her tone was contemptuous.

"And you're not Graves' whore?" Marie rasped derisively.

Angela's lips quivered. "No," she said softly. "I'm his slave."

"Oh, my dear, you are much more than that," Angela's master spoke behind her. "Slave? Yes. But also a pawn." His eyes lowered momentarily. "And the daughter LaCroix took from me."

"Stop your whining, you sniveling coward." LaCroix entered the room clutching his head. His forehead was stained red.

Filled with righteous anger, Graves vented his spleen at LaCroix. "How does it feel to witness the suffering of your children. To know that you alone are responsible for their pain?" Graves placed a hand under his chin and looked at LaCroix in consideration.

"There is actually one thing I have to be grateful to you; for making me a vampire. That is the rebirth, the bringing across of my new 'child' into this dark world. She has proven not only to be wonderful company, but it has been amusing to mold her like a lump of clay ." He walked to Angela, looking her over like a prize cow he was going to purchase. "Of course it must be done right away, before their eyes lose the yellow glow that first time. Do it right ..." He chuckled before continuing, "Then, of course, you have a most useful tool."

Angela was motionless in her humiliation, then slowly, the hand holding the crossbow lowered to her side. She gasped as a kaleidoscope of images filled her brain. Like a tape, all the murders she had committed ran backwards until she reached the last one, the first one. The girl with the rosy cheeks and the smile that was trusting, even in death. Graves jumped back as Angela began to scream high and loud. She sank to her knees, finally understanding what it was she had become. The guilt tore at her, she lifted a hand to rub her eyes and it came away red, bloody. She looked down, there was blood splattered on her clothes. It was everywhere, it would never end because of Him.

Angela rocked back onto her knees and held the crossbow in a steely grip. Swiftly she loaded it and took aim. Graves wore a triumphant look that turned to horror when he realized that her aim was not for behind him, where LaCroix stood, but directly at him. He opened his mouth to protest. Angela ignored him and buried a bolt right between his eyes.

He toppled forward, then lay still. Stunned silence surrounded Angela, who was once again numb. She was at a loss. The voices in her head began again, cheering her. *Ding dong, the wicked witch is dead*, she thought in macabre glee.

"Let me down," Marie bade Nick softly. On wobbly legs she made her way over to Angela. She held out her hand in a gesture of forgiveness. It was too soon to say the words. Angela may have helped her, but she had also assisted Graves in his schemes. It would be a while before Marie forgot that. She was startled when Angela's expression turned panic-stricken. Marie half turned and saw Graves rising to his feet behind her. Blindly, he groped and found her, perhaps thinking she was Angela. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tight. Marie grunted as she tried to free herself, and she felt her ribs starting to give way. Then she was free as LaCroix tore Graves away from her and Minnie leapt past her to tear out his throat. It was a blur, brown flashes of fur as the dog tore into his body. Revenge for what

had been done to her. Minnie found his heart, tore it in two. This time, he was undeniably dead. She sat at the feet of her mistress, raised her head for Marie's tender caress. Heedless of the blood and gore, Marie sank to her knees and clasped the dog's head close to her heart.

"You did good," she whispered into Minnie's ear. The dog looked over Marie's shoulder and growled at Angela. Marie shushed her, patting her comfortingly on the top of the head. "It's okay, Minnie, Angela won't be hurting you any more." Her eyes met Angela's, the other vampire nodded her assent.

Angela vowed to herself that no one would ever suffer again because of her. With a resigned sigh she gathered up the body of her former master and put him in the spot she knew the sun would find first at the dawn of the new day. She settled on the floor next to him to wait out her hours-long vigil. One by one the other vampires joined her. The night passed without a word spoken by anyone. When the first ray of sunlight began to cross the floor, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Because, incredibly, Graves body was beginning to reknit. They had all witnessed his spilled blood pool back together and travel to his body. The two pieces of his heart traveled along the river of blood and slid with a plop back into his chest cavity. Time, however, had run out for him. The moment his eyes opened, they were blinded by the sunlight which had inched along the ground to find him. The others, Angela included, all stepped back out of the sun's deadly rays. He had been so weakened that his resistance was almost nonexistent. He withstood the light for mere moments, blisters forming on his face and chest, unable still to move because of his grievous wounds. He stared into the light and glimpsed peace, and then it was all over. Flames engulfed Etienne Graves, burning like the fires of Hell, and then he was no more. Torn clothing marked the spot where he had been released from eternity. It was finished. They were nearly out the door when Nick realized that Angela hadn't followed them. He turned and watched, aghast, as Angela walked into the light.

She was oblivious to the others. She heard the voices of her Grandmother and her Father and different unknown relatives. As she stepped into the light she could see them, smiling at her with love. Hands, luminescent and transparent, reached for her. She raised her arms as if to say, 'Yes, I'm coming home.' The light which burned her flesh caused her no pain. It flamed supernaturally and claimed her. In almost an instant, her physical body was gone, yet she stood there still. A being of light, shimmering as she waved good-bye and reached upward once again for the similar iridescent column which stretched into the heavens. Then she was a part of it as the two lights melded and became one. With a flash, it disappeared and the room was once again claimed by the shadows of early dawn, the presence of the sun a mere sliver on the ground. Although the sun had nearly risen, they all wanted very much to leave the warehouse. The scent of death hung heavily everywhere. Silently, they went to Nick's loft.

They fed. They slept. They snuggled together on Nick's bed like kittens seeking to draw warmth and comfort from one another. They remained until nightfall, when they finally went their silent separate ways.

Nearly three weeks passed and it was New Year's Eve at the Raven. The passage of one year into another was an irrelevant event for a vampire. Years were meaningless to creatures whose bodies would never show the marks of time. It was simply another excuse to party. Marie, at least, was feeling rather festive. She danced and danced, and ignored the pointed stares which were cast in her direction. She was feeling friendly, and LaCroix was her favorite to be friendly with. She laughed with delight when he finally showed up, and she threw herself into his arms. He smiled in indulgent amusement and led her into the back room. His duties as bar owner could wait.

The smile on Marie's face faded as she gave her full attention to the task at hand, so to speak. Her hands worked nimbly on the buttons of his shirt, revealing the bare skin her fingertips longed to touch. LaCroix was having a little more difficulty getting to the parts of Marie he so urgently wished to explore. As a tease, she'd decided to wear a gold lamé jumpsuit, knowing it would cause this very problem. LaCroix, in his usual style, solved the problem by simply ripping it from her body. He breathed a sigh of relief; she was nude beneath. Their sounds of laughter and passion were drowned out by the loud rock music in the club, not that they cared.

Some time later they returned to the club's action, in considerably better spirits. Marie wore a cast-off of Janette's. It was long, tight, and black. A little too long, in fact. She felt like Morticia Addams.

Standing at the bar were Nick and the vampire known as Vachon. Their expressions didn't reflect the festive atmosphere of the Raven.

"What now?" LaCroix inquired rudely.

"And good evening to you, too," Nick sniped saucily. He sobered and pressed his lips together. Turning to Vachon, he said, "Do you want to tell them?"

The younger vampire's brows shot up. "Me?"

They warred quietly while LaCroix grew increasingly annoyed. "Let's go into the back room, shall we?"

Nick nodded. What he had to say was probably better said in private, considering the nature of it. He sighed and began with an apologetic look towards Marie.

"Vachon has heard some talk ..." He trailed off and looked at the former Conquistador.

"Oh, all right," Vachon exhaled. "Coward," he said to Nick.

"Well, you are the one who's heard the talk."

Patience at an end, LaCroix grabbed them both by the collar. "I don't care who, just tell me!"

Nick's eyes shot daggers at his former master. "Let me down now," he instructed softly. LaCroix's grip loosened and the two vampires pulled themselves free.

Vachon decided to start this time. "I've been hearing around the vampire community some disturbing things." He looked at Marie. "There's some concern about Marie's blood allergy, whether or not it can be passed on."

Nick touched a soft hand to Marie's cheek. "You must leave town. I've heard that the Enforcers might come to try and destroy you, the consensus being that you're a defective vampire. I've tried to reason with people, but it's starting to turn into a mob mentality."

LaCroix was furious. "Why is this only the first I've heard of such nonsense?"

Vachon winced at the sight of LaCroix's red glowing eyes. "I tried to contain it." He shrugged. "But I wasn't successful. Everyone is afraid of you, they were hoping to do the deed and deal with the consequences later."

"They were right to be afraid. I want names, now!" he demanded.

Nick shook his head. "No."

"No?" Only Nick could or would staid up to the angry vampire. His moods were legendary, as was his power. Yes, indeed, those plotting to kill Marie were cowards, but smart ones. Only a fool would walk up to LaCroix and say, 'I'm going to kill your consort, do you have a problem with that?' Nonetheless, the threat was real and couldn't be ignored. That was why Nick had already gone to Aristotle and arranged a new life for Marie. He handed her a packet containing all she would need, including the papers and numbers to a bank account with a considerable balance. She reached inside the brown clasped envelope and pulled out a plane ticket with one way passage booked for a 3:00 a.m. flight to New Orleans. Marie looked askance at Nick. He grinned sheepishly.

"Isn't that where all vampires end up eventually?" he teased.

Marie's lower lip began to tremble. It suddenly occurred to her that this was all real. She'd survived torture from a madman, only to have to run for her life from her fellow kindred. There was no doubt about it; being a vampire sucked.

"Let me get my things ready," she said finally, resigning herself to her fate.

"No, you can't. There isn't time."

"But what about Minnie?" she protested.

Nick put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulders. "Don't worry about her, she's being seen to."

Quite peeved at being ignored, LaCroix's tone was quite acid. "Don't I get a say in all this?"

Marie's eyes filled with tears. "I'm afraid not," she whispered.

"Come on, we need to leave now." Nick met LaCroix's eyes in apology, then turned to leave. He ushered Marie out through Janette's secret exit that only she, Nick and LaCroix had previously known about. LaCroix followed them to the airport, holding back until it was time for her to get on board the plane. He stepped forward to face Marie. She smiled, not surprised that their earlier parting had not

been the final one. She put her hands into his and lifted them up to press soft kisses on his cool flesh. LaCroix pulled her into his arms and placed his lips over her partly opened mouth. Nick watched, startled. He had never seen LaCroix so overcome. Not since one night nearly eight hundred years ago. His master had always kept himself coolly aloof. Passion from LaCroix wasn't something he had ever thought he would witness.

Marie clung to LaCroix's neck. Certain she would see him again one day, her heart was still heavy. Her mouth fused itself to his for long, quiet, desperate seconds, then pulled away. She turned to Nick for one last good-bye hug, then turned again to board the plane. LaCroix stopped her.

"We will meet again one day," he promised.

Marie nodded. "Yes, and we will know each other once again. As if a single day hadn't separated us."

She smiled at the two men who had brought so much into her life and realized that she had spent a Spring, a Summer, a Fall and a Winter with LaCroix. It was fitting that the final Season had been the cold dead one. Her eyes were soft with quiet reflection, but the next one was filled with all the promise of nature. Raising a small hand in a final good-bye, she didn't look back. She stepped onto the plane and found her seat. Looking out the window, she saw him one last time standing with Nick on the cold asphalt. Eventually the plane was in the air and he was a black dot which soon disappeared. Then she was alone. She sighed. It didn't feel as bad as she thought it would.

Far below, Nick turned to LaCroix. "Lets go out for a drink."

LaCroix grinned wickedly. "What a good idea, there was a stewardess who..."

Nick shook his head and cut him off. "I suppose some things never do change." He walked with LaCroix to a secluded area so they could take off the way they had arrived.

As he took to the night air, he thought he heard LaCroix say, "Perhaps, old friend, some things never should change."

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